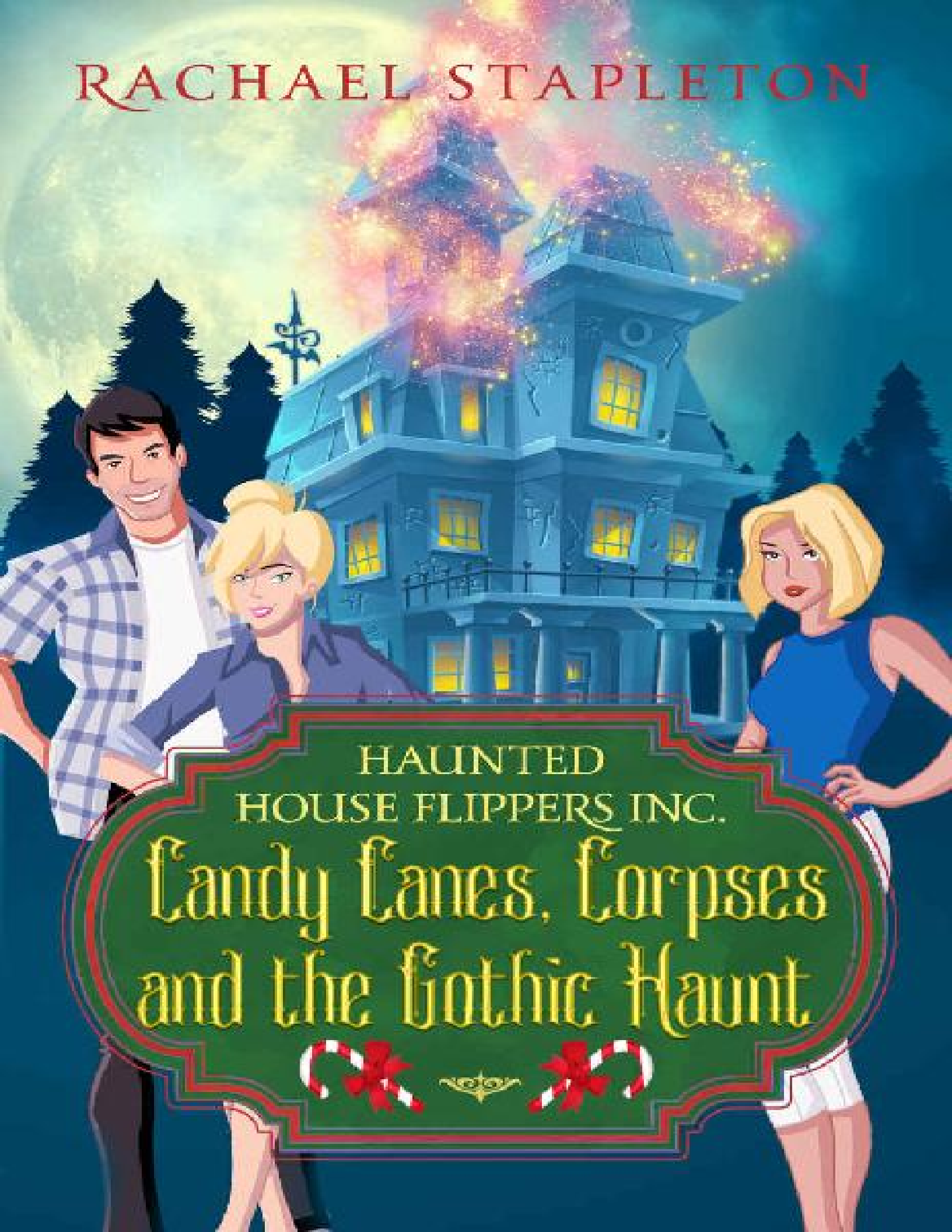


RACHAEL STAPLETON



HAUNTED
HOUSE FLIPPERS INC.

Candy Canes, Corpses
and the Gothic Haunt



Candy Canes, Corpses and the Gothic Haunt

Haunted House Flippers Inc.

Bohemian Lake Series 4

For all my DIY Mamas who knock down walls while the
hubbies are away.

Rachael Stapleton

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Bohemian Lake Series by [Rachael Stapleton](#):

The Bohemian Lake cozy mystery series is a world comprised of three sets. Each set focuses on a different Bohemian resident(s), although all of the books intersect.

A Penning Trouble Mystery
Haunted House Flippers Inc.
Bohemian Murder Manor Mysteries

Recommended Reading Order:

A Penning Trouble Mystery: *Murder, She Floats*
Haunted House Flippers Inc. *Cookies, Corpses & the Deadly Haunt*
A Penning Trouble Mystery: *Murder, She Slopes*
Haunted House Flippers Inc. *Candy Canes, Corpses & the Gothic Haunt*
Bohemian Murder Manor Mysteries: *Gypsies, Traps & Missing Thieves*
Bohemian Murder Manor Mysteries: *Make-Believes & Lost Memories*
Haunted House Flippers Inc. *Crumb Cake, Corpses & the Run-of-the-Mill*
A Penning Trouble Mystery: *Murder, Ye Bones*

Read all about Rachael Stapleton and her books at RachaelStapleton.com

One

The front door of Cookies & Corsets opened just as Juniper Palmer dunked one of the café's seasonal jolly ginger reindeer cookies into her candy cane latte. Soft, sugary scents wafted into the air as she licked the whipped cream from her lips. Five more minutes and then she'd head back across the road to her Victorian mansion to see how the building inspector had made out. Hopefully, the news would be better this time.

The sound of Christmas carols mingled with the chatter of the café's customers. It was non-stop in Bohemian Lake this time of the morning, which was great for the café's owner, Juniper's best-friend, Pike Hart; not so great for her own mug of cold coffee.

"Juniper Palmer, look at you. Beautiful as always," Eve Banter said, trotting up to Juniper's table. "How's that Ghostly Inn coming along?"

Juniper put down her coffee but before she reply, local journalist Penny Trubble showed up to correct her. "It's the Gothic Haunt, Eve."

"Good morning, ladies." Juniper got to her feet, wrapped an arm around each of them, and pulled them in for a big hug before answering. "It's inspection day, so cross your fingers and toes for me."

“Consider it done. Penny will cross her eyes for you too, won’t you, Pen?” Eve said with a wink.

Penny rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to the blackboard of specialties.

Eve leaned in. “See, told you.”

Juniper didn’t bother to explain that crossing and rolling were two different things.

“Anyway, I can’t wait for that taproom of yours to open. It’ll be nice to have somewhere to go for a drink aside from that dive over by the hardware store.”

“You mean Guitars and Cadillacs?” Penny asked, turning back around.

“Hell no, I wouldn’t step foot in that place. I mean the alley behind it. It’s cleaner, not to mention the cats screeching on the fence can harmonize better than the bands Evan gets in there.”

“Eve!” Penny scolded. “Have you no inside voice?”

Eve peeled her fuzzy mittens from her hands and smoothed down her long reddish-brown hair. “Sure do.” Her big brown eyes were trapped in a perpetual state of amusement. “It says the same thing as the outside one.” She deposited her gloves on Juniper’s table and turned to the barista. “How ‘bout you fix me a tipsy cocoa with extra sprinkles?”

“I think not. Just the cocoa and make it three, please? I don’t need a tipsy assistant at the paper. You know what happened last time.” Penelope interjected.

“Oh, you’re such a bah-humbug, Penelope Trubble. I don’t know why I allow you to employ me. And anyway that old man had it coming.”

“That old man is my father and your boss.”

“What, it was just a little laxative.” Eve smirked and turned back to Juniper, pulling open her giant handbag. Inside were several suspicious looking bottles and a giant ring of keys. “Ignore her. I brought the tipsy with me. Let’s ditch the Cindy Lou and take a stroll down Main Street? What say you?”

An unexpected laugh burst from Juniper’s lips just as the door swung open once again, smacking the ladies with an icy burst of wind and snow. Penelope zipped her coat back up and grabbed the tray of drinks from the counter. “Come on, Cratchit, back to work or I’ll dock your pay and Tiny Tim will starve.”

Juniper waved. She’d take those two over a comedy show any day.

A surly looking man in a red tweed coat slid inside behind a rosy-cheeked couple just as Penny and Eve slid out. Pike’s poor barista had just mopped and sat down for her break. The man dashed the toes of his boots against the welcome mat impatiently, leaving little tufts of snow to melt at the threshold.

Juniper felt bad for the barista and was preparing to pitch in when the doors to the back kitchen swung open, and Pike, a cool blonde in a green apron, returned. One oven-mitt-clad hand clutching a tray of chocolate

peppermint croissants, the other clutching a steaming mug of tea.

“Good morning,” bubbled Pike after she’d delivered the order. She smelled of cinnamon buns and cocoa as she whizzed by and Juniper guessed she was baking in that back kitchen of hers. “What can I get you?”

The rosy-cheeked couple who’d removed their coats revealing similar holiday sweaters, looked over the specialty blackboard, then ordered two eggnog lattes. Juniper couldn’t help but notice that the man behind them rudely tapped his boot the whole time until finally they got their order and moved to a booth by the Christmas tree. The scrooge looked familiar but Juniper couldn’t quite place him. She’d only been in Bohemian Lake for two months but that was long enough to meet people in a small town, especially when you owned the local haunted house.

“Good morning, Evan,” Pike said, as she returned to the counter and handed the grumpy man his paper coffee cup and a pastry bag. Juniper had gotten to her feet by this time and gave Pike a nod before handing in her dirty dishes and turning to head out the door.

“What’s so good about it?” Juniper heard the man grumble.

“Bye, Junie. Good luck on the inspection,” Pike shouted after her.

“Junie.” The man uttered her name with disgust. Then he bumped her arm as he pushed past her on the way out the café’s front door.

“Well, Merry Christmas to you, too, good sir,” Juniper shouted after him.

“What do you mean the exhaust line has been cut?” Juniper said. “That’s not possible.” She paced the dining room floor of her old Victorian mansion, taking in the curved architecture of the room and puzzling over how a house so perfect could be such a headache.

“I’m sorry. I can show you again.” He set his jaw and pointed back toward the commercial-grade kitchen they’d just put in. “You’re going to have to replace the wiring.”

He’d shown her twice already, and he was right, the line running to the brand-new stainless steel ventilation system had been tampered with.

“You’re also missing a vacuum breaker on the outside tap. You’ll have to schedule another inspection after you get these replaced.”

This should have been the final building inspection. It was one thing after another lately—as if the house was out to get them. The opening of her Inn and Taproom—the Gothic Haunt—was just over two weeks away.

“Sign here, please, to acknowledge that you didn’t pass.”

As the inspector passed a clipboard to her, she watched three of her construction workers moving in and out of the house. They were removing the old metal shelving from the basement. Jack and Juniper had put a temperature controlled wine cellar in last week with all new racks.

The inspector, who had previously dealt with Juniper's partner and boyfriend, Jack Young, studied the clipboard. "Juniper Palmer, huh? So, you're Jack's girl from back in the day?"

Juniper nodded to the inspector, thinking of her early twenties. She'd heard the term 'Jack's girl' so often, she'd almost gotten it tattooed across her forehead, even after they'd split up.

Post college—where they'd met through Pike—Jack and Juniper had opened their own company, Spirited Construction. Juniper had still been modeling part-time to help pay the start-up costs and was due to leave on assignment for a month when Jack proposed at his family's Christmas dinner—of all places. In a moment of panic, she had rejected him. They'd broken up and when she'd returned he was already dating the devil's hand-maiden, Sally Snaub—or Sally Big-Boobs, as Juniper called her. They remained an item for the next four years while he and Juniper maintained a business relationship.

Then they bought this old mansion in October. Jack and Juniper had fallen for the house—ghostly baggage and all—and in turn they'd fallen back in love. Or maybe they'd always been in love and they'd just found their way back to each other. Either way, Big Boobs hit the curb along with the ugly siding that had covered part of the Victorian's brick, and Jack and Juniper began their fairytale dream—or nightmare, depending on which day of this renovation it was.

“Juniper?”

Juniper blinked and looked up. “Sorry. I’m dwelling on what will happen if we don’t get this to pass. Everything is all arranged for a New Year’s Eve launch.”

“Try not to stress too much. Just tell Jack I said to get those things fixed first thing tomorrow, okay, and then give us a call back. We’ll do our very best to fit you in,” the Inspector said as he left.

Juniper fought the urge to beat her head against the exposed brick wall. What was she thinking, scheduling a big holiday launch without first passing inspection? Thank goodness Jack was an electrician, but still it would cost them time away from their other projects. Right now, he was staying over three hours away in the city, working on a Queen Anne restoration. He’d have to come fix this wiring and then immediately head all the way back to the job site to finish up before the annual Christmas Eve dinner at his parents’, which was only a week away. What a colossal waste of time.

Juniper’s phone buzzed, and she took a moment to reply to Jack’s text about the beam they’d ordered for an open concept farmhouse renovation in the next town over—yet another job that was supposed to be wrapped up before the holidays.

The second Juniper tucked the device back inside her pocket, it buzzed again, and she confirmed an appointment for blown insulation. She’d just ended the call when three of her burly workers fled the basement steps, shouting, white-

faced with fear. It would have been comical, had they not been clearly terrified.

“What is it?” Juniper called out following them. “What’s going on?”

Juniper had been in the construction business long enough to know things could go wrong on a job site. “What happened?” she repeated. Now that they were safe on the front porch, they shrugged. Juniper turned around and marched back down the hall to the basement stairs.

“Wait, Juniper! Don’t... don’t go down there!” Juniper heard one of the men yell after her.

Juniper ignored the warning, tromping down the first three steps. As she reached the midpoint on the staircase, she caught a flash of white. The blurry streak had crossed in front of the arched doorway that led into the wine cellar. By the time she realized what she’d seen, it was gone.

“Another problem?”

Juniper started at the sound of her chef’s voice behind her.

Truth be told, Feliz Merlot was more than a chef. He was an old friend from her modeling days. Originally from Spain, he knew just about all there was to know about tapas and wine. He also made the best churros Juniper had ever tasted—not that she’d admit that to Pike. Feliz wasn’t hard on the eyes, either—muscular, dark hair, and brown-eyed. She’d tried to set him up with Pike to no avail.

“You look like you saw a ghost.”

A floorboard creaked. "Very funny, Merlot," Juniper paused. "Upstairs. The vent's electrical wire is faulty. We failed inspection again." Juniper followed him back to the kitchen to show him.

"*Mierda*," he swore. "How?" He ran his fingers through his dark wavy hair and examined the wire closely. "Someone did this on purpose."

"But how? No one's been near this kitchen aside from us since it was installed. It probably just broke."

"Wires don't just break. I bet it was that foul mouthed Louise woman from the cheese shop. She was back here the other day arguing with me, but I don't know when she would have had the chance." Feliz paused as if he was trying to remember.

"Arguing over what?"

"*Queso manchego*. She hates it. Can you believe that—a cheese connoisseur who dislikes the most popular cheese in Spain?"

"Oh, you're being silly, Feliz. People are allowed to have their own opinions."

Feliz shook his head. "I don't trust anyone who doesn't like sheep's milk cheese."

"Okay, well let's just pretend it wasn't the nice lady from across the road. Maybe a mouse chewed it?"

"It doesn't look chewed."

"That's true. Maybe it was faulty, so Jack didn't finish hooking it up."

"Does that sound like Jack to you?"

“Maybe he got interrupted.” At this point, Juniper was simply relieved it wasn’t something deadly like the gas line.

“*Mierda*,” he swore again.

“There’s no other explanation.” Juniper said, ignoring the possibility that it had something to do with the ghostly figure she’d just seen. “We’re the only ones who have been near it.”

Feliz scratched his head. “And what about the half dozen other little things that have gone wrong here the past few months. I’m telling you, *mi amiga*, either it was Louise, or that *espíritu* who lives here is a poltergeist.”

This wasn’t the first time Juniper had heard his opinion on the matter. Sure there’d been some minor annoyances, but they’d been bound to happen, especially when dealing with an older home. Jack and Juniper were always running into things like this in the historic home construction business. It went with the territory. Then again, the things that were happening here did seem to be intentional.

“Okay,” Juniper said. “So, maybe I don’t quite believe these things are accidents.” She turned and entered the front foyer. She’d considered bringing in a ghost hunter a couple of weeks ago, a professor of psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Sciences, and the son of a local historian, but she’d decided against it. Perhaps it was time to bite the bullet and reach out. Juniper pulled his card from her pocket and studied the name: Professor Daemon Wraith. It couldn’t hurt to get his opinion on things.

She crossed the wide-plank floor of the taproom and sat down at the bar. She refused to believe it was sabotage. This town was full of people who had become family to her. Thirty-five years of neglect had left the run-down Victorian mansion-turned-duplex looking like a haunted house, and everyone was over-the-moon happy that they'd fixed it up.

Feliz took the stool beside her. "*Amiga*, it is no coincidence. Someone is sabotaging us."

"You don't know that," Juniper said. "Everything has been fixable. Don't you think if someone was out to get us, they'd come up with something a little more complex. And how are they getting in? None of the windows have been broken, and none of the doors have been tampered with."

"That means nothing. Perhaps someone stole one of the keys off your friend's massive key ring."

Eve Banter was the unofficial keeper of Bohemian Lake. There was a rumor that she had somehow finagled keys to every business in town. Everyone knew it but nobody really cared.

Juniper laughed. "If there's a person in this town who can outfox Eve, then they deserve that key, but I'll do my due diligence and check with her. Not that she'll ever admit it."

"What about the attic passageway that was used last time to break in and 'fake' haunt you?"

"Jack bolted that sucker up. I helped."

"Have you checked to make sure it's still bolted?"

"No, but good call. I'll do that too."

Feliz stood. "It's dinnertime. Why don't you go home to Jack? I'll lock up tonight."

"Thanks, but Jack is away. He's staying in the city close to the Queen Anne jobsite. We've reached our deadline, so we can't have the guys slacking off every time we get a dusting of snow."

"Go to the café then and have dinner with Pike. I want to work on that *Natillas de Leche* recipe and I don't need you underfoot, sticking your dirty fingers in my bowls."

"I see. So, you'd rather I stick my dirty fingers in Pike's pastries, huh? Well, I'll have you know I only do that for chocolate and, anyway, your custard is delicious already."

Feliz shook his head. "I'm working my churros into it. I want it to have a twist for the big celebration."

If it turned out half as good as the churro, they'd sell out opening day.

Juniper gathered her black leather purse and left a short time later—calling Jack, who promised to be there bright and early in the morning. Once outside, she turned to gaze up at the Gothic square tower, topped by the imposing iron widow's walk; it looked stark against the bright gray sky. Sometimes Juniper had to pinch herself. It was hard to believe that, not long ago, this had been a run-down, ghostly shell. The former Doctor's House had been owned by Pike's business partner Lulu McCloskey, but thanks to her cousin Helen Patone and her haunting ways, the house had been abandoned.

Spirited Construction, a.k.a Jack and Juniper, had cleaned up the Gothic Revival facade, reinforced the widow's walk and patterned shingle roof, and added a commercial kitchen, taproom and dining area. *Voila*. The Gothic Haunt. They'd thought about brewing their own beer but the Bohemian district was filled with wineries and craft breweries, so they decided they'd rather work with them than compete. They were also going to work with the town's council to offer up tour packages in combination with the other local restaurants and wineries. Bohemian Lake was already a tourist destination so why not add to its offerings?

Juniper was tempted to take her chef's advice and drop back into Cookies & Corsets, if only to tell Pike about her inspection and inquire about the Grinch from earlier, but she was feeling more than a little drained.

Instead, she grabbed a bowl of French onion soup and a sandwich from Deer's Deli and took it home to Jack's place. The place was littered with boxes ready to be moved into the attic apartment of the Gothic Inn because what's an Inn without Innkeepers? They just needed to finish up the cosmetics and they could move the furniture up. That was next up on her to-do list. Speaking of which, with food in her tummy, she set the tub to fill and reviewed the to-do list. By ten o'clock, she was bored. The bath was heavenly but the unfinished attic was weighing on her mind. It wouldn't hurt to go over to the mansion and plan the layout.

Her phone buzzed with an incoming text as she was pulling on her knit sweater: *I know what's going on. I have*

proof. Get over here.

There were also two missed calls from Feliz.

Juniper hit her voicemail and listened as she pulled on her coat and boots, and headed out the door. His voicemail basically said the same thing as his text.

I know what's going on now. I have proof. Get over here so we can call the cops and get to the bottom of this.

“Feliz?” Juniper called as she closed the door behind her. The lights were all on, but he wasn’t in the taproom. Probably still playing with his new recipe in the kitchen. Juniper crossed the plank floor to the other side of the taproom and pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen. The scent of cinnamon and vanilla made her mouth water. His latest custard creation sat on the stainless steel counter. A pot of milk had burned away on the stove. On the prep station there was lemon, cinnamon and egg yolks separated from the whites. It was odd he’d walk away with the stove on and eggs out. Juniper switched the burner off and rinsed the pot, then went looking for Feliz.

He wasn’t in the parlor, the dining room or upstairs. Juniper stopped outside the men’s restroom and knocked on the door. Twice. It was empty. She stood in the hallway and tapped her foot. Then she went back down the hallway to the taproom. Where could he be? Surely, he wouldn’t have taken off and left the place unlocked—especially after

asking her to come down here. Could he have stepped outside for some fresh air? Not with milk on the stove. Juniper sat down at the piano and played around.

Ten minutes later, Feliz still hadn't returned. She started to pace the foyer, and that's when something moved. Spooked, she jumped, plastering her back against the foyer's paneled wall.

When Juniper looked straight at it, it disappeared. But in her peripheral vision she could see a woman in a long old-fashioned gown, motioning for Juniper to follow her into the basement. Juniper called out her chef's name again. Why had he bothered calling if he was going to leave? Juniper snatched her cell phone from her pocket and tapped his number on the speed dial with a lot more force than necessary. Hopefully, he'd have a good explanation. Seconds later, the sound of a phone ringing made her jump. The sound was muffled, so she couldn't figure out where it was coming from. Instead, she followed the ghostly woman to the basement door. The sound got louder. The ringing seemed to be coming from downstairs in the basement. It didn't make sense that Feliz would be in the basement, especially in the dark. Juniper fumbled for the light switch and then tread carefully down the stairs, pausing at the midway point when the spirit disappeared. This was the same place Juniper had seen her earlier.

Gee, thanks for all the help. The ringing had now stopped, and Feliz Merlot's voice mail picked up.

“Feliz?” Juniper hit the next light switch and the overhead lights blazed on. Juniper blinked a couple times at the sudden brightness. The door to the wine cellar was open. As Juniper moved inside the room, she spotted Feliz on the floor underneath one of the new wine racks that were meant to be installed upstairs behind the bar. Her fight or flight kicked in and she raced to him. Her hands shook horribly as she lifted the wooden shelving off him. Then she recoiled in horror, there was a good reason why Feliz wasn’t answering his phone.

Two

Feliz was covered in glass and spilt wine. Juniper hyperventilated as she spun around and raced back up the wooden basement steps, almost tripping halfway up. She couldn't catch her breath. Somehow, she managed to make it into the parlor where she collapsed on the antique sofa and called 911.

Juniper paced the taproom floor, occasionally stopping to stare out at the Main Street traffic. Even at this late hour, the street and sidewalks were busy. People finishing up their Christmas shopping, oblivious to the fact that her friend was dead. Eve and Pike rushed up the front walkway. Juniper didn't have to ask how they knew to come. Eve's spy network was legendary. The Mabels monitored the police scanners like regular people trolled social media. Juniper choked back a sob as they reached her. If she cried now, she'd never stop. It wasn't long before the Bohemian Lake police arrived and began their investigation.

"Here, drink this."

Juniper took the cup of tea offered to her. "Thanks, Pike." She was now sitting at one of the tables in the dining room waiting for the investigators to finish. Jack's cousin was the detective in charge; Detective Kaden Bones looked like an older version of Jack. They both had stubble and dark hair—although Kaden's was silvering a bit at the temples

now. Juniper took a sip and made a face at the doctored tea. “What did you put in here?” It tasted like whisky, but Juniper didn’t have any on hand.

“Eve just made it. Is there something wrong with it?”

Juniper couldn’t resist laughing even though she teetered back on the edge of tears. “Of course she did.” She took a large swallow of whisky, ahem, tea. “It’s good, being unconscious would be ideal right about now.”

Pike smirked and pulled out a chair, sitting down beside her. “You’re so quiet. Tell me what’s going on in that brain of yours.”

“Oh, Pike. I just keep asking myself why? Why did this happen? Why didn’t I look harder for him when I arrived? All the time I’d spent waiting and complaining to myself that he wasn’t here, he was—oh God—what if Feliz was still alive when I got here?”

“You can’t go there, Junie. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“But what if he was calling for me and I didn’t hear? I could have saved him if only I’d thought to check the cellar.” The tears Juniper had been holding back burst like a dam. She was still sobbing when Jack’s cousin pulled up a chair to interview her.

“Let’s get these questions out of the way so Pike can take you home to sleep, okay?”

Juniper nodded. “Especially if it helps you catch whoever did this to him.”

“Did what to him?”

“Killed him,” Juniper said as she thought about all the little things that had happened over the last few weeks and how Feliz had been convinced they were being sabotaged. Juniper hadn’t believed him. If she’d reported the incidents earlier, Feliz would be alive. It was no coincidence that he figured out who it was, and an hour later he was dead.

Kaden took her hand. “Junie, no one killed Feliz. This was a tragic accident. Nothing else. Feliz must have slipped on a piece of broken wine bottle and pulled the shelf down on top of himself, hitting his head on the floor.”

Juniper pushed her mug aside with her other hand. “No. I don’t believe that. It was absolutely not an accident. That wine rack is nowhere near heavy enough to kill someone even if Feliz had been clumsy enough to slip and pull it down on top of himself. Why would there be a broken wine bottle on the floor?” She told him about the vandalism and that day’s electrical incident. “Feliz called me tonight and said he knew what was going on.” Juniper’s voice caught, but she continued anyway. “I didn’t believe him. I didn’t believe someone would actually come in here and do those things to try to keep us from opening. I should have believed him.”

“Even if someone was trying to keep you from opening, that doesn’t mean there was any foul play in Feliz Merlot’s death.”

“Feliz said he had proof. That’s why he called me to come down here. He had something to show me.”

“Something in the cellar? Did you see anything suspicious down there?”

“Other than my friend’s dead body? The ghost of Victoria made an appearance. But it’s not like she killed him. She just led me to his body.”

He was quiet like he was thinking about that. “What do you think Feliz wanted to show you?”

“I have no idea. He was baking custard. There was absolutely no reason for him to go into the wine cellar.”

“Most likely, he heard the wine bottle fall and shatter and he went to check it out.”

“But he left me a voicemail on my cell phone—he said to come now.” Juniper felt the tears coming again, and she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. If only she’d believed Feliz sooner, this wouldn’t have happened.

Three

Snowflakes twirled in the light of the overhead streetlamps, gathering on the neighbor's giant, clear plastic orb that held Santa and his sleigh on the lawn. Sadly, the sight was marred by the blue strobing lights of the emergency vehicles. They cast an eerie glow over the neighborhood as Juniper, Pike and Eve descended the snowy steps of the Gothic Haunt. Bohemian Lake was a near-ghost town at three in the morning, but that wasn't the only reason it looked and felt different to Juniper, someone in this town had murdered her friend.

Pike and Eve had insisted on walking her. They even tried to spend the night but Juniper had shooed them away. She wanted to be alone. The idea of calling Jack crossed her mind, but he would be up soon for his three-hour drive back. Instead, she made herself a Neocitran and cried herself to sleep.

In the morning, she cried some more. By the time she had showered and dressed, she was determined to find the person responsible.

She returned to the Gothic Haunt with a renewed purpose and, before she started bawling again, she pulled out the mop and a bucket. Crime scenes were messy. She was halfway done cleaning when Jack showed up to replace the vent's electrical wire. She had barely dried her hands on

her apron before he folded her into a hug. His sweater was soft and smelled of sandalwood.

“How you holding up, babe?” he asked and handed her a coffee when they’d finished snuggling. “Kaden called and filled me in. I almost got a speeding ticket trying to get back to you.”

“I’ll be okay.”

Jack nodded. My goodness, he was handsome. Even the laugh lines from his near-perpetual grin didn’t seem to age him. “Listen, don’t get mad, but I want you to consider taking some time off. We can delay the opening.”

Nope. No way. They had worked too hard to stay on schedule. If Feliz had been in her place, he’d have kept going.

Jack must have recognized the determined look on her face. “Yeah, I didn’t think you would go gently into the silent night.” He glanced around. “So, where’s this wire we failed over?”

Juniper showed it to him without mentioning anything. She wanted to see his reaction.

“What the heck happened? Who cut the wire?”

Juniper wanted to tell him about her chef’s—and now her—suspicions, but she held back. He’d never leave her to go back to the Queen Anne jobsite if he thought she was in danger, and they needed that paycheck if they were going to cover their bills. “Please just fix it.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re keeping secrets?”

Juniper patted him on the shoulder. "It's just your distrusting nature."

He rolled his eyes and got to work.

"Juniper?"

Juniper was on her way into the parlor when she smelled Pike's signature perfume—baked goods.

"Junie?" Pike called again.

"In here."

Pike whooshed into the parlor carrying a Christmas tin. She put the tin down and crushed Juniper in a bear hug.

Juniper disentangled herself before she started crying again. Pike was like a sister to her—they even looked alike. When they'd modeled in college, the photographer often used them in shoots where they wanted twins. And like a sister, she always knew how to make her laugh... and cry.

"I'm doing better now that Jack's back. I still can't believe Feliz is gone, though," Juniper said.

Pike lowered herself into one of the wingback chairs that Juniper had picked up at the local antique shop. Juniper sat on the sofa. "I know," Pike whispered opening the tin and handing Juniper a cupcake and napkin. "Feliz was so nice. We just exchanged recipes yesterday."

Juniper broke off a piece of cupcake and brought it to her mouth. "Oh my goodness, is this gingerbread?"

Pike nodded. "Mmm-hmm, with a cinnamon cream cheese frosting." She licked her finger as she said it, so it came out kind of garbled. "This is his recipe. I gave him my

aunt's recipe for cinnamon flan. Maybe I'll make some in his honor."

"That would be nice." Juniper picked some more at the cupcake but she couldn't bring herself to finish it. "Did Feliz mention anything about the strange things that happened here lately?"

"Like what? The Ghost?"

Juniper told her what Feliz suspected, including what he'd said in the voicemail.

"Why didn't you say anything last night? It wasn't an accident, then?"

"I don't think so."

Pike was silent, studying her. "I guess that makes sense," she said finally.

"What do you mean it makes sense?"

Pike put a hand on her arm. "Well, surely not everyone in the neighborhood wants you to turn this house into an Inn and Taproom."

Juniper stood and paced in front of her before sitting back down. "But you said yourself that the town had a severe shortage of places to stay overnight. There's only Caravan Manor, and it's outside of town. This house was an eyesore before Jack and I fixed it up."

"I know that. I just mean not everyone thinks that way. I don't think anyone minds the Inn part but the fact that you're going to have a tap room. Think about it, Junie, you have a good relationship with most of the local craft brewers and wineries in the area. Hell, some of them are family, and

then you brought in an exotic chef. I bet there are more than a few people who feel threatened by that.”

“Gimme names, Hart?”

“Okay, how about the other licensed establishment owner in town—Evan—he owns Guitars and Cadillacs?”

“Was that the guy who shoved me yesterday?”

Pike nodded. “I’ve heard Evan is afraid you’ll steal all his customers. He was spouting off the other day about boycotting your place. He’s even considering adding something besides fried food to his menu.”

Guitars and Cadillacs was a small neighborhood tavern two blocks away. It was a shots-and-beer kind of place that featured live music.

“That’s ridiculous. I seriously doubt the Guitars and Cadillacs clientele would be interested in coming here.” Juniper leaned back in her seat. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Ah... actually... I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“And why not?”

“Because he also happens to be Sally’s latest boytoy.”

“Sally, as in Jack’s ex-girlfriend, Big Boobs?”

“The one and only. Apparently, she’s holding a bit of a grudge, which makes you *persona non grata*. He’s as likely to shoot you, Junie, as to look at you so please don’t approach him.”

“Well, where in the hell does she get off. I was with Jack first. She stole him from me.” Juniper’s blood pressure was rising just thinking about it.

"I know that, Junie, but those two are crazy. Logic need not apply, if you know what I mean."

"Anyone else?"

Pike rubbed her fingertips over her lips. "Hmm. Let me think." She tossed a few more names out, but they were all neighbors Juniper was on good terms with, like her neighbor Louise Olivet, who owned the cheese shop; and Rudolph Windsor, who owned the pharmacy, the gift store and the pawn shop down the street.

They talked for a few more minutes, but in the end, she didn't have much in the way of suspects. The most promising one—really the only one—was Sally's boyfriend, Evan Cross.

By six in the evening, Juniper couldn't do another thing. The stainless steel surfaces gleamed and you could probably eat off the hardwood floor. In a way, she was happy to be exhausted. Maybe tonight she'd sleep without visions of dead bodies dancing in her head. The alarm company was coming bright and early the next day to install a state-of-the-art system. If whoever had killed Feliz returned after tonight, they'd be in for a surprise.

Juniper locked up for the night, and as she started down the street, someone called her name. The male voice sounded familiar. He called her again, and then said, "Wait up." With those words, she put the face together with the voice.

Finn Valentine had been Jack's best friend forever. Pike had been madly in love with him all through college, but

she'd been too shy to tell him. The last time Juniper had seen him was on stage with his band at their graduation party.

He reached Juniper just as she turned around, and pulled her in for a warm hug.

"I'm glad I caught you," Finn said. "Jack said you're usually here late."

His cinnamon-brown hair still had the same waves Juniper remembered, and although there were a few lines around his brown eyes now, he didn't look much older. It made her wonder what he was doing in Bohemian Lake right now. The last she'd heard he was working for a big advertising agency in the city. He'd been a musician once upon a time but that hadn't worked out.

"I'm actually leaving early tonight. It's been a long day."

"Jack mentioned what happened," he said. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thanks."

"Have you had dinner yet? I'd like to talk to you about something."

Now that he mentioned dinner, she realized she was starving. "Sure. I know a cozy little pub not too far from here."

They exchanged idle chitchat while they drove. After they were seated, she gave him some recommendations on what was good.

"Isn't this place your competition now?" Finn asked.

“I guess. But it’s a friendly competition.”

Finn grinned, showing off his trademark dimples.

The server brought their drinks, and they ordered burgers. Finn tried a local craft beer called peppermint porter at Juniper’s suggestion, and then Juniper came right out and asked what he was doing back home.

He took a long pull on his beer before he answered. “I moved back here a few weeks ago. My parents are snowbirds now, and their house is empty. I’m house sitting for the moment—at least until I find another place.”

Juniper frowned. “So you’re not working in the city anymore?”

“No, I’m done with agency life.”

He took another drink and pushed his glass aside. “Tell me about the Gothic Haunt.”

Nice change of subject. “What would you like to know?”

“Everything,” Finn said. “Your menu, your plans.”

“Okay, as long as you’re not planning on stealing the Inn out from under me.”

Finn made a devious face and threaded his fingers together like a mastermind. Juniper laughed and started talking.

“Sounds like it’s going to be great,” Finn said after Juniper shared her plans. He lifted his glass. “To new endeavors.”

They clinked their glasses together, and then Juniper thought of Pike, “You know, Pike’s back in town as well. You

seein' anyone?"

"Not at the moment." He grinned and wriggled his eyebrows.

Easy boy.

"How 'bout you and Jackie boy? I can't believe you stole him back from that uptight Snaub."

Juniper laughed at his play on words.

Before she could say anything else, their meals arrived, and they moved on to reminiscing about the old days. When the server cleared their plates and brought the check, Finn passed him his credit card over her objections. After the server left, Finn said, "Jack told me you're going to need a new chef."

"I am. Do you know someone?"

Finn cleared his throat. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I need someone who can start right away. Like tomorrow. Feliz was completely in charge of the kitchen from the food all the way to hiring the kitchen staff."

The server brought Finn's card and the receipt back. As he signed the slip, she said, "So, are you going to tell me who this person is?"

He leaned forward. "It's me."

"You?" This had to be a joke. Juniper wondered if Jack had put him up to it. "You're an advertising executive."

"Was an advertising executive. I'm now a certified chef."

"No way. That's quite the career change."

Finn nodded. “Yep. I had to do something else—too many sharks swimming in those waters. I always liked to cook, so I started taking classes. I thought I’d open a little café or something like Pike did, but the Inn and Taproom sounds like just the thing for me right now.”

He was serious. This could be the answer to her problem. With the opening coming up so quickly, she needed to act fast. But what if he couldn’t cook or take direction? She didn’t like the idea of bossing around a friend. And did he know anything about tapas?

Finn stood, reached for her hand, and helped her up. “You don’t have to decide right now,” he said as they headed for the exit. “Just think about it and let me know.”

He held the door for her and they stepped outside.

“I don’t need to think about it,” Juniper said. “Come in tomorrow at ten and make me and Pike lunch. If we like it, you’re hired.”

Finn’s smile stretched from ear to ear. “I’ll be there. You won’t regret this, Junie.”

Four

JUNIPER woke to the sound of “Jingle Bell Rock” and hurried to dress for work. She’d slept like a yule tide log. Thank goodness for alarms. In less than twenty minutes she was strolling through the streets of Bohemian Lake, where strands of Christmas lights sparkled in the evenings, wound around porches, and traced roof lines. By the time she reached Cookies & Corsets, the place was packed.

She got in line behind a woman in a white fur-lined coat who hummed along to “Frosty the Snowman” and tapped her fingers happily against the countertop while she waited for her peppermint tea.

Pike had all of her holiday specialties out and they smelled delicious. Everything from peppermint pancakes to candy cane cupcakes. *Yikes*. Between Pike’s pastries and sampling the menu for the Gothic Haunt, she was going to have to join the local martial arts class that Penny Trubble taught; although, with two businesses, Juniper hardly knew when she’d have the time to go.

“Ho, ho, ho.” Jack Sr.’s voice boomed from the doorway behind her. He cut in front of the line and scooped her up for a hug. Juniper’s feet dangled for a moment, just as Pike turned and waved to them from behind the glass counter. She was decked out in her usual quirky attire. Today’s outfit

was a retro vintage dress, complete with a Santa apron and hat.

The man behind them sighed loudly when Jack Sr. asked Juniper about the Inn. "For cripe's sake. Hurry it up, would ya, Hart?" he said.

"Keep your pants on, Evan," Jack Sr. said. "You'll get your Nutella doughnut."

Juniper turned around and instantly regretted making eye contact.

"Yeah, but in what decade?"

Jack Sr. shook his head and gave her another hug, then he disappeared to a table in the corner where the Vianu ladies who owned and ran Bohemian Lake's Caravan Manor sat. Jack's dad was such a flirt, not that Jack's mom minded. She always joked that one of the ladies should take him up on his offer and get him out of her hair.

Evan sighed again. "I haven't got all day, woman."

Pike rolled her eyes. "Don't mind him, folks. Evan has confused his name with Ebenezer this morning." She chuckled at her own joke.

Juniper decided now was the time to bite the bullet. She smiled and extended her hand as she swung back around to face him. "Hi, I'm Juniper Palmer."

Evan ignored it. "Oh, the girl who's trying to put me out of business."

Juniper forced herself not to step back and stood her ground. "I'm not going to put you out of business."

"Oh, I know that. I said 'trying.'"

Pike finished waiting on the woman in the white coat, who made a wide path around Juniper and Evan, no doubt expecting fisticuffs. Without asking what Evan wanted, Pike put two doughnuts in a bag and held it out to him.

"Your order is on the house today," Pike said. "Please, Santa, let it sweeten you up."

He snatched the bag out of her hand and turned back to Juniper. "Watch yourself, Palmer. I'm not about to have some home wrecker steal all my clientele."

"I hardly think—"

"You'll be sorry you ever messed with me and mine." He stomped to the door and shoved it open so hard the little bell at the top broke off and hit the floor.

The encounter rattled her. Juniper jammed her hands into the front pockets of her jeans to stop them trembling.

Pike came around the counter and put her arm around Juniper. "Don't you let him get to you. He's all talk."

"Really? You saw what just happened."

"Oh I know. He's a grumpy Grinch, no doubt about it, but I talked it over with Eve and we don't think he's capable of murder. Eve says he's too much of a yellow belly."

Juniper almost spit her gum out on the floor. "She said what?"

"Yes, I believe she also called him lily-livered. She's been watching a lot of westerns lately—traded in her dime novel fetish." She patted her arm and went back behind the counter. "Just keep an open mind."

Juniper told her she would, but as she walked across the road to the Inn with her cappuccino and cream cheese and lox bagel, she couldn't help but picture that awful man standing over Feliz Merlot's dead body.

The building inspector arrived at eight while Juniper was eating her bagel. It took him less than five minutes to check the repairs Jack made the day before, and the Gothic Haunt passed inspection. Score one for them, finally.

The alarm company came just after that and went to work. While they fished wires and installed motion detectors, she repainted one of the Inn's bedrooms. Juniper had already painted it once, but the color resembled that of a banana Popsicle, so she'd decided to tone it down. The bar area needed to be finished, but Juniper couldn't help thinking about Feliz every time she attempted to install that wine rack.

Juniper was putting on the final coat of paint when she heard Finn calling her name. "In here," she hollered.

He opened the door. "Good morning." He was dressed in a crisp white shirt with black pants and a black apron, and he looked ready to work. He sniffed the air. "Painting, huh?"

"Yeah. Actually, repainting. I think I'm being too picky about the color but I couldn't bring myself to finish the bar area yet."

Finn put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Junie. Do you want me to do it?"

Juniper gave him a slight smile. "Feliz would have been the first one to tell me to get a grip. So, are you ready

to see the rest of the place and then do some cooking? Pike should be here soon and we expect to be awed, you know.”

“Did you tell her it was me?”

Juniper grinned. “Nope.”

His eyes sparkled, and he held the door open for her. “Lead on, boss lady.”

As they entered the taproom area, she waved to the alarm company’s installation technician, who was up on a ladder. The entry from the street led into the front vestibule and foyer. From there you could go into connecting rooms. The taproom was on the left and behind it was the kitchen. To the right of the foyer was the dining room and behind it was the parlor. Juniper pointed out the table arrangement in the dining room. “There are six booths, twelve of the square tables that seat four, and two round ones that seat six to eight, plus eight stools at the bar in the taproom.”

They went behind the bar, and Juniper showed him the taps for the various beers. “I’m planning on having four beers year-round and I’ll add two others, depending on the season. For our launch, I’ve lined up a peppermint porter and candy cane ale.”

“How festive,” Finn said. “I can definitely work with the seasonals.”

“Alright,” Juniper said when they entered the kitchen. “I will leave you to your own devices. Happy Cooking.”

A short time later, delicious aromas emanated from the kitchen as Juniper sat at her desk going over some bills that had come in the day before. Her stomach growled

loudly just as one of the alarm installers poked his head into her parlor.

He grinned. "I heard that belly growl and I concur."

Juniper laughed.

"We're almost finished, so if you want to follow me, I'll give you a rundown on how everything works."

Juniper followed him out to the taproom, and they reviewed how the keypad near the front door worked, how to arm and disarm the system, and how to change and add codes. He also showed her where the motion detectors were located.

As soon as the technician left, she headed for the kitchen. It was almost noon and Pike should be arriving any minute. Juniper burst through the door and stopped cold. Finn grinned, most likely at the incredibly dumb look on her face. "You're early. Go sit in the dining room and I'll bring it out."

"First, I'll need to call up Santa and his elves. You cooked up a feast fit for a family." Juniper waved her arm over the island.

"It's true. I might have gone a little overboard. The portions will be small, of course. It's a tapa style lunch."

"No wonder my taste buds were salivating." Juniper took a closer look and realized most of the dishes were from her menu. How in gadzooks had he gotten a hold of her menu? She paused in front of the chorizo flatbread pizza. It smelled heavenly. The next bowl held Spanish meatballs. He'd also prepared a charcuterie board with dried cured pork

loin, salt cured beef, quince preserve, mixed marinated olives, dried cherries, roasted red peppers, an olive tapenade, and the classic *manchego* cheese. As if that wasn't enough, then there were potato, mushroom and leek croquettes, grilled vegetables, calamari, and the ever-popular Spanish staple—paella.

“How did you do all of this?”

He stood back, looking very proud of himself. “I cheated. I prepped at home last night. I also picked Jack’s brain as to what you might have on your menu since you only glossed over that the other night.”

Juniper didn’t have time to ponder any further because she heard Pike calling her name. Juniper poked her head into the taproom. “In here.”

Pike pushed through the door. “I smell something heavenly. Where’s this new chef of yours?” She stopped cold when she spotted Finn.

“You’re just in time. Pike, you remember Finn.”

He reached out his hand. Pike took it, then dropped it like it was a hot croquette. “Oh, my gawd!” she squealed. “Finnegan Valentine!”

Finn swept her into a hug.

“I can’t believe it!” Pike said. “You’re the new chef. You’re staying in Bohemian Lake, really?” She turned to Juniper. “Why didn’t you tell me Finn was coming back?”

“He surprised me, too.”

“I can’t believe it. It’s been forever and a day.” Pike grabbed Finn and hugged him again. “I am so glad to see

you.”

Before Pike went after Finn again, Juniper steered her over to the door. “Why don’t we have a seat in the taproom so we can try some of this food before we hire him?”

She took one last excited glance at Finn and disappeared into the taproom.

Finn started laughing. “Wow. Pike looks good, huh?”

“She sure does,” Juniper agreed and disappeared into the taproom.

Five

THE food was as good as Juniper had hoped. After they'd put a pretty good dent in the tapas, Pike took the leftovers as well as Finn over to the café. Juniper was sure they'd be celebrating all night. The three of them had cleaned up while Juniper filled him in on exactly what his duties would be. Before he left, she gave him all of Feliz Merlot's paperwork, which included information regarding the kitchen staff he'd been interviewing and training. Juniper told him if he had any questions, they could talk about it the next day. Of course, Pike offered to help him with anything and everything.

Five minutes after they left, her phone rang. It was Jack. "Finn just told me the good news," he said.

Happy to hear his voice, she smiled to herself. "That was fast."

"He wanted to thank me for giving him the heads-up about the job."

"You mean the inside scoop on our menu, you traitor."

Jack laughed. "He told you about that, huh? Anyway, he couldn't say enough nice things about you... and Pike."

Juniper felt her grin get wider. "Well, that's good, especially the part about Pike, since I have a feeling they'll be seeing each other more often now."

"Uh-huh."

She'd never told Pike, but she had a sneaking suspicion Finn had always had a thing for her, too.

After Juniper hung up, she checked the surfaces. Everything was in order, and for once Juniper didn't have anything pressing that needed attending. Figuring this might be a good time to talk to some of the neighbors, she made sure all of the doors were locked, then grabbed her purse and headed for the main entrance. Before she reached it, the door opened and Rudolph Windsor stepped inside.

Rudolph owned the pharmacy and gift store on the other side of the street along with the antique shop. Well, it was called The Chic Bohemian Antique Shop, but it was basically priced like a pawn shop. Still, Rudolph had nice stuff. It was where she'd gotten a lot of the period furniture for the Inn. It was definitely the cheapest antique shop she'd ever visited.

"I heard about the accident and wanted to offer my condolences," he said.

"Thank you. You just missed a feast but can I get you a drink?." Juniper pulled out a bar stool and motioned for him to sit.

He shook his head. "I can't stay. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Juniper nodded. "I'm managing."

Juniper watched him as his gaze roamed the room. "I see you finally got an alarm system," Rudolph said. "Smart move—especially the motion detectors."

The front door opened just then and Detective Bones came in. "Am I interrupting?" he asked.

"Not at all." Juniper said and the men greeted each other.

"I'd best be going," Rudolph said. "If you need anything, remember I'm right across the street."

Kaden and Juniper sat down at the bar. "I stopped to make sure you were doing all right," he said, "and to tell you Mrs. Merlot has arranged to have Feliz returned to Spain."

Juniper had assumed that was what would happen. Juniper wouldn't get to attend his funeral, but maybe she could do something to honor his memory here. "Have you heard anything from the medical examiner yet?"

He didn't answer right away, and Juniper knew he was trying to decide how much to tell her.

"Kaden, I'm not a child."

"I know that." He patted Juniper's hand. "We got the preliminary findings."

"And?"

"Feliz had trauma to his head."

"I know." Juniper put her hands in her lap so Kaden wouldn't see them shaking. "He was murdered."

"That's not likely."

"But you just said—"

Kaden held up his hand. "Let me finish. The examiner said the wound on his head could have occurred any number of ways, that, in his opinion, it was likely Feliz hit his head when the wine rack fell on him. Maybe it took him by

surprise when it fell and he tripped and smacked his head or maybe he tripped over the bottle as I suggested.”

Juniper shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Junie, but we didn’t find anything to indicate that anyone else was there.”

Juniper stomach lurched. Feliz was in the kitchen making his custard. Why would he leave milk on the stove and go into the wine cellar?

The answer was that he wouldn’t. Juniper didn’t care what the medical examiner thought. His conclusion was wrong. Feliz had been stone cold murdered. She couldn’t sit any longer. She slid off the stool and paced back and forth. “What about his phone call to me?” Juniper asked. “It’s too much of a coincidence that he said he found something, and next thing we know he’s dead.”

“Do you know what that something was?” Kaden asked.

“You know I don’t. He wanted to show it to me.”

“Do you know for sure someone was sabotaging the Inn?”

“Not exactly, but Feliz was onto something that night.”

Kaden sighed. “I know you don’t like it, but unless I discover otherwise—or find some new evidence—it will be ruled an accident.” He got up and hugged her. “I’m sorry, Junie. It’s not what you wanted to hear, and I’d really like to keep it open but we have our hands full right now with the local teenagers. There was another overdose last night, and the mayor is hell-bent on getting answers. These kids are

getting MDMA from somewhere. But I promise if there's any new evidence, or something else comes up, we'll take another look."

After he left, she collapsed into a chair. Juniper was stunned, not only did Bohemian Lake have a killer, it had a drug problem. What was going on and what was MDMA?

Six

THE cheese shop, Let It Brie, was next door to Cookies & Corsets, so Juniper decided to start her investigation there, given that Feliz had been suspicious of the owner. The shop was owned by her neighbor Louise Olivet, who in Juniper's opinion was outgoing and friendly and always had a smile on her face. Juniper was sure she wasn't the one resorting to sabotage and murder, but she might know something. Juniper needed to order cheese for the charcuterie board before the opening anyway, and this was as good a time as any to do it.

Louise looked up when the bell on the door chimed as Juniper entered. "Junie!" She set down the wheel of Gouda she'd been wrapping and rushed over to her. Juniper wasn't too surprised when she pulled her into a hug. "I am so sorry about Feliz. Pike told me about it. Such a horrible thing to happen to someone. I just can't believe it."

"Thanks. I can't, either." Juniper paused to look around. The shop was decorated in a hodgepodge of vintage farm and hand-me-down items that somehow looked as if they belonged: pastoral paintings, antique milk jugs that doubled as vases, and cabinets stuffed to the brim with mismatched porcelain. There was a whole vintage French country vibe to the place that Juniper loved. In the center was an old dining table that Louise used to display small

chutneys and cheese boards. "Feliz mentioned you were over the other day," Juniper said, peeling off her leather gloves and loosening her wool scarf.

Louise curled a swath of shoulder-length blond hair behind her ear. Together with her flowered, baby-doll styled dress, she could have been eighteen years old instead of almost forty. She took Juniper's hand and pulled her over to the glass counter where she practically sat her down on a milk crate. "Yes, I brought a gift basket of cheese and preserves over to you. I'm afraid Feliz didn't quite like my selection. We got into a little scuffle about which cheeses went with what."

"Yes, Feliz was quite passionate about food."

"It was silly. I wish I could undo it now." Louise looked genuinely sad. She pulled out another stool and sat down.

"I'm sorry I haven't been back over to see you," she said, "but I didn't want to get in the way."

"You wouldn't have been in the way. I spent yesterday cleaning and today hiring a new chef."

"Really? You hired a new chef?"

"You seem surprised."

"It's just that, well, I didn't expect it. Especially not so soon."

"I didn't have any choice with the opening so close. Besides, it's an old friend of ours. He went to college with us."

Louise got up and went behind the glass counter. "So you'll be opening after all?" She picked up the wheel of

Gouda she'd been holding when Juniper came in. "I thought—I mean, I heard—" Her phone rang just then, and she answered it.

While Louise took care of business, Juniper walked around the shop looking at the jams and cheeses and wondering why Louise seemed to think she wouldn't be opening the Inn. Was that what everyone was thinking?

Louise finished her call. "Sorry about that."

"No need to apologize." Juniper smiled. "Although, I do need to place an order for the opening. I'm hoping to make your family's farm my regular supplier."

"Ah, wonderful!"

Juniper told her what she had in mind, and Louise showed her what she thought would work with the rest of the menu and wine list. Juniper was more than pleased with the prices. After all, the charcuterie board was a classic Spanish tapas selection. When they finished, Louise said, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Actually, there is." If Juniper was going to find out anything to solve her chef's murder, now was the time. "Have you seen anything strange going on near the Inn lately?"

"Strange? I'm not sure what you mean by that."

"I mean anyone hanging around who shouldn't be. Someone going in when no one is there. That sort of thing."

Louise chewed her lip. "I haven't noticed anything. Other than the workmen you've had going in and out. But that's when either you, Jack or Feliz were there. Why?"

Juniper wasn't sure how much to share, especially when the police were calling it an accident. "We've had a few instances of vandalism. I was just wondering."

"Probably kids. Have you heard they're doing drugs now? It's so shocking. Every time I put holiday decorations outside, some little brat steals them." She reached under the counter, pulled out a dented aluminum baseball bat and grinned. "The last time one of them tried to lift something from in here, I brought this baby out. They haven't been back since. You should get yourself one of these."

Juniper laughed. "Well, I'm not quite on your level yet, but I did have an alarm system put in today."

"That's good, but watching them run when I lift the bat is better."

After Juniper left Louise's shop, she headed to the grocery store and pondered what she'd learned. Who knew Louise had such a dark side. Could she have murdered Feliz over cheese? No, that was silly.

Oh well, maybe she'd have better luck with the others tomorrow.

Two hours later, the fridge and cupboards were restocked, and she'd fixed an egg white omelet with green peppers and jalapeños for dinner. Juniper had eaten way too much of Finn's offerings at lunch. It was time to balance those macros out.

She'd finished half of her plate when her phone rang. It was the alarm company notifying her that her motion detectors had been set off.

Seven

T HANKFULLY, she only lived a block away, and she made it back to the Gothic Haunt in record time. A squad car was double-parked on the street near the front entrance and an officer stood at the door. Juniper raced up the icy sidewalk, doing her best not to slip.

“Juniper Palmer?” The officer looked her over with a skeptical eye.

“Yes. I’m one of the owners.”

“I checked the doors already,” he said. “They’re all locked. No sign of forced entry. Do you have your key? I’ll check inside if you’d like.”

“Yes, please.” Juniper unlocked the door, and he went inside. She followed and punched in the alarm code.

“Please wait at the door,” he said.

Juniper did, taking deep breaths to slow down her heartbeat, which could have kept time with the traditionally fast-paced “Carol of the Bells”. Juniper couldn’t help replaying Saturday night in her mind. It seemed like forever before the cop returned.

“The place is clear, miss.”

“Are you sure?” Juniper said. “The alarm company said the motion detectors were activated. Wouldn’t that mean someone was in here?”

“Probably just a glitch of some kind. It happens all the time.”

“This is my first day with an alarm system, so I wouldn’t know.”

He suggested Juniper follow up with the alarm company in the morning.

After he left, she locked the door behind him, then went to take a look around herself. Thirty minutes later, she hadn’t found anything out of order. Either the officer was right and there was a problem with the alarm, or the white lady of the Gothic Haunt was now interfering with her technology. Time to try another angle.

Juniper pulled out her phone and made the call.

Eight

P ROFESSOR Daemon Wraith greeted her outside the Gothic Haunt with a smile and a firm handshake. He pointed to the new sign they'd just had installed on the front lawn. "That's quite the fitting name you've got for the Inn, Ms. Palmer?"

Juniper smiled, shaking his hand. "Apparently so. Please, call me Juniper. I thought we were being tongue in cheek with the Inn's name at the time because of the rumors but that's what we get."

"Why don't you show me around the place and tell me about your visitor?"

Juniper nodded. "Sure, for starters I think it's this woman." She said, handing him a family portrait she'd received from the old owner, Lulu McCloskey. "That man was a Doctor, and he built this house as a wedding present for his bride, Victoria. I think it could be Victoria that I'm seeing but I don't know for sure. They say the doctor killed her and then himself but no one knows why because they were so happy."

"Yes, it's always tragic circumstances with ghosts," he said, looking forward at the Victorian. "Who said they were happy?"

"I don't know. Her sister Marjorie, maybe? She lived next door with her husband." Juniper pointed to Fern Baron's

place. "Her husband is the one who heard the commotion and found the bodies after the Doctor shot himself. Anyway, Marjorie's husband tried to sell the place after the murder-suicide, but no one would buy it. Marjorie's husband hanged himself from the chandelier above the stairwell." Juniper shivered. Saying the story out loud was giving her the creeps. "Then there's Kaitlyn Patone's murder. She died in October in the attic but I don't think this is her. The dress, when I catch a glimpse of it in my mind's eye, looks antique."

"In your mind's eye? Are you psychic then?"

"Oh, heavens, no," Juniper said, taken aback by the suggestion.

"I only meant when I see her... well it's hard to explain, but I never really see her straight on. It's kind of a blur and a feeling, and I guess I just can picture her in my head. We had a fake haunting in October but the woman responsible was arrested. I guess I expected everything to stop after that and the obvious things like the music did stop, but lately there have been cold spots and these sightings."

"I hate to break it to you, but I think you have some hidden talents. That isn't how most people see ghosts."

"Really?"

"Yes, but we can discuss that another time. So what's been happening here?"

"Well," Juniper said, her hands nervously tilting the photo back and forth. "Every time I go near the basement I

get the feeling I'm being watched. And more than that, sometimes I feel like I'm being followed."

"Is that all?"

"No," Juniper said after a moment. "Lately, I see her and she leads me to the basement. She always disappears when I'm halfway down the stairs. I feel like she's trying to tell me something, every time..." Juniper paused.

"What?"

"Well, it's just we've had a lot of things go wrong here lately. I don't know if this house is cursed or we're being sabotaged but every time I turn around some lamp's been busted, some wire's been cut, or someone's dead." Juniper choked up as she finished her sentence.

"Your chef, you mean?"

"Yes," Juniper whispered, her lower lip quivering. The police ruled his death it an accident, but I think he had help. Are ghosts capable of murder?"

"Sometimes," he said with a nod. "Okay, if you'll lead me inside I'll get to work."

"Can you really help?"

"That's why I'm here, Juniper," he said. "Give me a few hours and let me see what I can do."

He followed her up the four steps to the front entryway and they went inside.

"My goal is to move the spirit on," he said confidently as they moved into the foyer. From his back pocket he pulled out a small gadget.

"What is that?"

"It's an electrostatic meter; it measures variances in electrostatic energy." He held his arm out and waved it in a circle around the foyer.

With an eye on the needle bouncing back and forth across the gauge, he moved ahead through the foyer and up the stairs. The needle gave a jolt as he passed by the main chandelier. The needle bounced again. He put the little gadget in the back pocket of his jeans and closed his eyes.

"So far, I've picked up two energies here, one female and one male, and you're right: one of them is not giving off a pleasant vibe. I'm going to focus on the female first. You said her name was Victoria, right?"

Juniper nodded.

There, at the end of the hallway, he stopped. "It's all right," he said aloud. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Juniper noticed an immediate dip in temperature. She pulled her plaid scarf tighter around her shoulders and shivered slightly, feeling the icy coolness penetrate her clothing and her skin, seeping into her bones. He attempted to speak with the ghost for several minutes. Juniper left him to it and went to sit in the parlor to warm up.

When he finally returned, he said, "she's having trouble communicating. That sometimes happens if the spirits are new or tired. You said she's been reaching out a lot lately so she's probably been expending much of her energy. All I can get from her is that she's scared. She keeps repeating that he's under the house!"

Juniper gasped.

"I won't know for sure until she gets a little stronger. The man who murdered her—energies like him often create a portal to a lower plane of existence where they can become stronger and more deviant. He's not here right now, but I get the feeling he has a doorway stashed somewhere, so he could be your poltergeist—the one messing with your stuff. Although it would take unimaginable concentration on his part to sever a wire or to bash someone in the head, so your chef's death seems suspect. I've known spirits that could push someone down the stairs but that is usually the extent of it. If this male spirit was your culprit, then the only way to combat him would be to close the portal, but I'm afraid I can't find that doorway unless he makes an appearance and I track him back to it. Have you seen him in your mind's eye?"

"No, never."

He looked relieved. "Alright, well I'll have to come back, then, and hopefully Victoria will have regained some strength by that time," he said with a smile. "But it won't be until the New Year. I'm afraid I'm off on another assignment until January."

Juniper nodded. He'd informed her of this when she called him. "Of course," she said, handing him his fee. "Thank you for coming so quickly. I'll be in touch with you should this continue and I'll try to find that diary of Victoria's that Lulu gave me."

After he left Juniper went into the taproom to plug in the Christmas lights, only to find the cord had been cut—just

like her vent. Not to mention, the Christmas presents she'd collected to donate to the local toy drive were missing, too. Someone really had broken in. But how in the world had they gotten inside? And out? Juniper was a little spooked about the whole thing, so she reset the alarm, locked up, and headed home.

Nine

UNABLE to sit still, Juniper paced the living room floor. What was this person's motivation? There were other—and probably better—ways to go about keeping her from opening. Why not just burn the joint down?

And it totally baffled her how the person had gotten into the Inn with no telltale signs. No door or window alarms had been set off, only the motion detector. She'd double-checked the tunnel's doors as Feliz had suggested and they were still bolted, so how had it been done? Juniper suddenly had an idea. She picked up the phone and called Kaden's cell.

"Hey, Junie," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Someone tampered with my lights and stole some gifts. Do you happen to have Feliz Merlot's keys for the Inn?"

"I can double-check, but I didn't see them in his personal effects. Why?"

Juniper told him what happened. "I thought maybe someone stole his keys. That would explain how they got in."

"I don't like this at all. You need to change your locks. I'll call a locksmith I know and have him get in touch with you," he said. "I'm also going to see if a unit can do some extra drive-bys, and you shouldn't be there alone at night."

“Do you believe me now that Feliz Merlot’s death wasn’t an accident?”

He paused before answering. “I won’t go that far, but I do agree something is going on.”

He hadn’t exactly said he’d keep the case open, but this was better than nothing. They talked a few more minutes, and Juniper promised him she’d be careful. Five minutes later, the locksmith called, and they agreed to meet first thing in the morning. Hopefully, between new locks and the alarm system, there would be no more sabotage.

The locksmith came as promised, and by nine a.m. Juniper had brand-new locks and two sets of keys.

Jack arrived as the locksmith was leaving. Today, he was dressed in faded jeans and a long-sleeved plaid shirt. Juniper’s stomach did a little flip.

“What are you doing back already?”

“Something going on I should know about?” he said, ignoring her question.

“Sort of.” It was time to tell him what was going on.

As he listened, his expression grew dark. When Juniper finished, he said, “And you didn’t think to tell me any of this before?”

“Well, I—”

He swore. “Let me get this straight. Someone’s been breaking in, he may have killed our previous chef, he broke in again last night and you had a ghost buster here?”

Juniper felt her face flushing. "That pretty much sums it up."

Jack ran a hand through his hair. "Great. Just great."

"Maybe I should have told you—"

"Maybe? Maybe you should have told me?"

"I'm sorry," Juniper said. "In retrospect, I should have said something, but I honestly didn't think the vandalism would continue. I didn't want to add more to your plate. Besides, your cousin thinks Feliz's death was an accident. And, hey, you never answered me: why are you here?"

"Because I knew something was up. I'm home for good."

"What about the Queen Anne?"

"Done. If there's anything else, then I'll just drive up and back in the same day and don't argue with me. My mind is made up."

Juniper smiled. "I love it when you get stern. Your eye twitch is so sexy."

"And don't I know it... So, you disagree with my cousin, huh?"

"There are too many things that don't fit for his death to be an accident. I was leaning toward one of our spirits being a poltergeist, but that wouldn't explain the missing presents. I'm sorry I didn't tell you." When Jack didn't say anything, Juniper went over to the bar and broke into tears.

Jack sighed. "Don't cry, Junie."

He walked over, took her hand and pulled her into his chest. "You don't have to deal with this alone. I couldn't live

with myself if something happened to you.”

Juniper inhaled his sandalwood cologne and relaxed. “I get it.” It came out like a squeak.

“I love you.” He pulled out two bar stools, and they sat. “It just would have been nice to know everything that’s been going on. I had no idea. We’re in this together, okay? This Inn might be your baby but I’m still your partner in every sense of the word and I just want to take care of you.”

“Yeah, well, I feel the same way about you but don’t forget I’m a grown-ass woman.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“You’d better.”

Jack grinned. “Yes, dear.” A serious look returned to his face. “But you have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“If Feliz really was murdered, you, me or one of our staff could be in danger, too. Any time you’re planning to be here late, tell me. Not just you, we’ll need to make sure no one is here alone.”

“Deal.”

“Good.” He hopped off the stool and reached over to kiss her forehead. “Besides, I have no idea how to make a charcoal board. This place would flop without you running it.”

“Charcuterie board,” Juniper corrected.

“See what I mean?”

Ten

FINN was on the ball. By eleven o'clock, he had talked to the kitchen staff Feliz had hired and scheduled two more interviews for that afternoon. While Finn worked on recipes with a new trainee and made calls to various vendors, Juniper decided it would be the perfect time to visit a few more of her neighbors. She wanted to host a Christmas day social to honor Feliz Merlot's memory, so it would give her an opportunity to extend an invitation. And to question them about anything suspicious they might have noticed near the Inn.

Cookies & Corsets seemed like a logical place to start. It had nothing to do with the fact that Juniper had a sudden craving for one of Pike's peppermint cappuccinos topped with whipped cream and gingerbread. Or maybe it did. The fragrance of freshly ground coffee beans and the sound of holiday blues welcomed her as Juniper stepped inside. The place wasn't quite as busy this morning, but there was still a good crowd—a mix of senior citizens, college students, young mothers with children, and an artist or two.

Pike's barista looked up from her spot behind the counter. She was seventeen and bore a striking resemblance to Zooey Deschanel—if Ms. Deschanel had pink streaks in her hair.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite haunted home owner,” she said with a grin as Juniper reached the counter.

“And exactly how many other haunted home owners do you know?”

She pretended to think about it. “Four. But you’re the only one across the road, so you get the best coffee and treats.”

Juniper laughed. “Preferential treatment, I like it.”

The barista reached over and squeezed her hand. “How are you? You doing okay?”

“I’m all right.”

“I knew you would be. It’s just such a shock.” She reached for a cup. “Do you want the usual?”

“Yep.”

While she fixed her peppermint cappuccino, Pike came out from the kitchen and Juniper told her about the gathering for Feliz. The baking was done for the day, so she poured herself a cup of plain old coffee and joined her at the corner table.

Juniper spooned the last of the whipped cream from the top of her cappuccino, licked the spoon, and set it down on the table. She told Pike about the paranormal investigator, and the most recent incident with the tree, and asked if she or any of her customers had noticed anything out of the ordinary.

Pike thought for a moment. “I can’t say that I have, but I’m not usually here at night unless there’s some neighborhood thing going on.”

The fact that no one was open all night was throwing a wrench into Juniper's strategy. Her neighbors couldn't very well see anything if they weren't there.

"I can ask around. Some of my early morning customers are out and about all night. Maybe one of them saw something."

"That would be great," Juniper said.

"We can talk about it tonight—if you're still coming."

Juniper had almost forgotten. Tonight was their monthly book club meeting at Caravan Manor.

On the way to the counter, Pike turned back and grinned. "If worse comes to worst, we can always stake out your place. I'm always up for an adventure."

Juniper finished her cappuccino, thinking about Pike's suggestion. It wasn't a bad idea at all. As a matter of fact, it might be just the thing. Juniper left the coffee shop with a plan in her head and a smile on her face.

The rest of the day passed quietly. The kitchen staff interviews went well. Finn seemed to know the right questions to ask and in the end decided to hire one of the two candidates. After that, Juniper sorted through some waitstaff applications and made a few phone calls to schedule interviews. They'd hired a few people already, but they needed to hire more.

She'd just finished up when Jack poked his head into the parlor. "How about we both call it a night and I take you out to dinner?"

The idea was tempting. If Juniper didn't have book club, she'd probably have taken him up on it. "Can I take a rain check? I already have plans tonight."

"Another hot date?" Jack made a hurt face.

"Not unless your idea of hot is an evening at the manor with seven other women."

"Well, now. That would depend on the women."

Juniper laughed. "I guess it would."

"Okay, I'm gonna head back up to the Queen Anne site then and wrap some things up so we can get paid. I'll come back home tonight but it will be late so maybe you could stay with Pike?"

Juniper nodded. "I'll talk to her."

Jack leaned in close until their lips were practically touching. "What about tomorrow night? I'd really like to take you out. I've been away so much, working on the Queen Anne, and you've been so wrapped up in these renos."

Juniper leaned back in her chair. "You mean you don't already have a hot date planned?"

The smile widened on his face. "I do now."

Eleven

JUNIPER arrived to the Vianu's Caravan Manor a few minutes late, but the ladies were enjoying some spiked tea so no one minded. Pike and Mallory Vianu were standing in the corner, deep in conversation. Everyone else was digging into the scones and clotted cream and mini cakes that the manor's head chef, Nataliya, had laid out. It was quite the feast—giving Pike a much needed break. Juniper grabbed a scone and a mug of Spiced Cider and took her seat beside Penny.

"Those e-books are crap," Eve Banter said. "Back in my day, you could read in the bath and safely spill wine without having to worry. Now I can't even take a book on vacation. Heavens to Betsy, if I get sand in it, or even leave it out in the damn sunshine, the silly thing will overheat. It's like a Victorian woman. Pretty soon it will need its own fan."

"Well, they are good for reading at bedtime," Mallory said with a chuckle as she came to join the group. "And I like how you can enlarge the font if you're tired."

"Heck, no, the smallness of the screen means you only get a couple of hundred words of text on it and it gives me a thumb-ache. Besides, I hate that I can't see what other people are reading in the park. You know, I can tell a lot about a person by what they read."

“Oh, Eve, you cannot, and you are beyond nosy.” Penny chimed in.

“Juniper, dear,” The manor’s owner, Nana Vianu said, noticing her. “How are you doing today? The cards informed me that there’s been some unpleasantness at the Inn, lately.”

“The cards,” Dani snorted. “Maybe this card,” she said elbowing Eve.

Eve made a face. “You be quiet. In my day, Dani was a boy’s name. These moms today—”

“We know, Eve,” Penny said, with an eyeroll. “We’ve heard your thoughts on names before.”

“Stick this in your yap, would you?” Eve’s cousin Alma, handed her another mini cake. “The grownups are trying to have polite conversation.”

Juniper smiled and took a swig of her cider. “Whoo. I take it Eve was in charge of the brew.”

“What is this, ‘pick on the prettiest one here’ night?” Eve cackled at her own joke and took a swig straight out of her liquid Tylenol bottle.

“Where is Lulu, anyway?” Eve’s cousin, Alma, asked.

“She’s on a cruise with the hubby,” Pike replied as she put her cake down on a napkin. “After the doctor gave Peter a clean bill of health, they decided to do a bit of traveling.”

“Who’s running the vintage clothing shop?”

“I am. I mean I’m not ordering new inventory or anything but I’m manning her sales counter for her. It’s not

like I'm not right there in the café, anyway. She's going to return the favor when I take vacation later."

"Oh, are you planning a trip somewhere?" Alma asked.

"Oh, no," Pike said. "Just... when I do. These are delicious," Pike said. "I'm going to have to get the recipe from your chef. The regulars would love them."

Eve made a face. "Speaking of chefs—"

"Yes," Mallory tapped Juniper on the arm. "You've been holding out on us, Junie."

Juniper had no idea what she meant.

"Why didn't you tell us Feliz was murdered, and you had a ghost hunter in?" Mallory said.

So that's what they'd been talking about. She'd figured either Pike or Eve would spill the beans, eventually. Juniper put her scone down on her napkin and took a breath. "The medical examiner said Feliz Merlot's death was likely accidental."

"I take it you don't believe that," Nana said.

Pike spoke up. "Of course she doesn't. Tell them what you told me, Junie."

"I don't think—"

"Oh, no you don't," Mallory said. "You're not getting out of it now. Spill it, girl."

"Someone's been vandalizing the Inn. I didn't believe Feliz at first, but now..." Juniper swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She should have been used to telling the story by now, but she wasn't. "There were a few minor things that were more annoying than anything."

“Like what?” Mallory asked.

“One morning, the mirror behind the bar was cracked when I arrived. Another time, some of the lightbulbs were unscrewed. Just the other day, the new kitchen vent’s electrical wire had been cut. Things like that.”

“They don’t sound minor to me,” Nana said.

Juniper continued her story. “On Saturday night, Feliz stayed late to perfect a recipe. He called and left me a voicemail while I was in the bath that he’d found something. Then, he texted me to come right away so we could call the police.” Juniper’s voice shook and she paused.

Pike patted her arm. “You’re doing fine.”

“When I got there, I didn’t see Feliz anywhere. I thought he’d left for some reason. I should have known something was wrong when I found burnt milk on the stove and eggs sitting out on the counter. Feliz would never have gone anywhere and left things cooking unless it was an emergency. The white lady appeared—”

“The white lady?” Dani interrupted.

“The ghost of the Doctor’s wife, Victoria. I’ve been seeing her more and more lately. Anyway, she led me to the basement and then she disappeared. I finally called his cell phone and heard it ringing in the wine cellar. I followed the sound and found him.”

The room was quiet when Juniper finished. Nana was the first to speak up. “Yep. Sounds like murder to me.”

“What about suspects?” Penny asked. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“There’s a bar owner who thinks I’ll run him out of business. He also happens to be the boyfriend of Sally Snaub.”

“She’s a bad apple, that one.” Nana said.

The ladies all nodded appropriately.

“Other than that, I’m at a loss. Everyone else in the neighborhood seems to like the idea of the Gothic Haunt. It’ll bring more traffic to their stores.”

Mallory agreed. “The busier the street is, the better.”

Pike shifted. “It could be someone who doesn’t want the extra traffic, or someone who plain just doesn’t want a taproom in town.”

Nana drummed her fingers on the table. “The killer doesn’t necessarily have to be after you. Perhaps someone has a grudge against Jack’s family and is taking it out on your joint business venture.”

They went through a few more options but didn’t come up with a thing.

“I’m sorry we weren’t more help,” Nana said. “Is there anything else we can do?”

Juniper was out of ideas. “Just keep your eyes and ears open, I guess.”

“Maybe I should stake out your place,” Penny said.

“Ooh,” Eve said. “That’s a great idea. Like Richard Dreyfus and Emilio Estevez.”

“Like who, now?” Dani questioned.

“Oh my god, you are such a baby. Isn’t it past your bedtime or something?”

“I can’t help if you’re a dinosaur and you keep making prehistoric references.”

Penny was good at her job but Juniper couldn’t afford to pay her right now and Juniper knew she’d insist on doing it pro bono. If Juniper came right out and told them no, they’d try to talk her into it, so Juniper just said, “Let me think about it.”

“What’s to think about?” Eve asked. “I say we meet at eleven tomorrow night. We can sit in the coffee shop and watch the front of the house.”

“What about the back?” Pike asked. “Someone needs to watch the back entrance.”

“I’ll keep an eye on the back door from the cemetery on the hill.” Penny said.

This was ridiculous. Juniper jumped up. “No. Absolutely not. I appreciate the offer, and I appreciate you wanting to help, but I can’t allow it. You’re forgetting that Feliz was murdered in cold blood. I am not going to put any of you in danger.”

Juniper planned to be a hypocrite and stake out the Inn after she left Caravan Manor. Other than last night when the alarm had gone off, she had no idea what time the break-ins had occurred. Whoever it was seemed to know her schedule—or, at least, seemed to know when the place was empty. Except for the night Feliz was killed, that is.

She went home and changed into her black coat. Thirty minutes later, she was ready to catch a killer. Main Street was busy no matter the time of day or night. Between

the cars driving by and those that were parked, her car wouldn't be the only one on the street. Not that her truck was all that recognizable, since she usually walked, but still she didn't want Feliz Merlot's killer to see it. If he or she knew it was Juniper's truck, they might change their mind about breaking in. Juniper didn't want to park too close because it would be obvious, so she drove around the block once before choosing a spot three storefronts up on the opposite side of the street. It was late, so Rudolph's boutiques were closed.

Juniper could see the front door and windows easily from her vantage point. If the killer tried using the stolen keys on the front door, he'd have a surprise coming.

Shortly after eleven, a snowmobile drove by and slowed as it passed the taproom. Juniper slid down in her seat even though she was on the opposite side of the street and the driver was looking in the other direction. The driver was covered head to toe in a helmet and snowsuit, this could be the killer. The snowmobile circled the Inn and then disappeared around the back.

The last thing Juniper needed was to confront a killer but she couldn't call the police unless she saw them actually trying to get in. She got out of her car, pulled up the hood of her parka and then crept up the side of the house opposite the driveway. She jumped into the trees when she saw a vehicle's headlights turning into the Inn's drive.

This was it, something was going down.

She pulled out her cell phone and punched in Jack's number.

Doh. Voicemail.

She left him a message and then sent him a text. He would definitely see that. Not that he could help her since he was three hours away. She was shivering in her parka because the temperature had dropped. She wasn't ready to miss this opportunity though.

Instead she headed around the back and there, in the shadows of the back porch, was a large man trying to break in.

She pulled out her phone to dial the BLPD when the snowmobile driver came out from behind the shed and tackled the intruder.

She recognized the shouts.

Eve?

Twelve

P IKE'S barista was at her usual spot behind the counter chatting with Eve when Juniper strolled in.

"Hey, Junie," Eve grinned. "How's Jack's head?"

Juniper smirked. "Better, but you're not exactly his favorite person today, so keep your distance."

"He should be thanking me. I was only guarding the place."

Turned out Jack had gotten back from the Queen Anne jobsite early but he left his phone inside the Gothic Haunt. When Juniper wasn't home from book club by eleven, he headed to the Inn to see if she was there. Of course his key didn't work because the locks had been changed; so he was peering in the window, trying to see if there were any lights on when the masked snowmobile driver, Eve, attacked him.

The barista passed Juniper her coffee across the counter and she asked for today's special to go.

Pike came out of the kitchen. "Just the person I wanted to see. I may have come up with another suspect."

Juniper gave Eve a sideways glance, meaning keep your mouth shut. She didn't want Pike knowing she'd attempted a stakeout without her. She turned back to Pike. "Lay it on me."

"What about Rocco Deer from the deli? He could be afraid everyone will go to the taproom to eat instead of his

place.”

“Hmm...I don’t think so. Rocco has never threatened me. As a matter of fact, he’s always been cordial and even excited about the Inn. Anyone else?”

“What about someone Feliz crossed?”

“That’s possible, I guess,” Juniper said, “but I have no way of knowing who that could be, aside from Louise. They argued over cheese before he died, but somehow I can’t see her murdering him over that.”

“Hmm, well, she does have a temper. I heard she hit a kid one time with a baseball bat for knocking over her display.” Pike crossed her arms over her chest. “What about our stakeout idea—”

Juniper didn’t let her finish. “No. It’s too dangerous.”

“We’d be sitting in our cars or in the coffee shop. I don’t see how that could possibly be unsafe. If anyone showed up, we’d call 911. We wouldn’t be dumb enough to confront him. Or her. Or whoever.”

Juniper wasn’t so sure about that. It was easy to imagine hot headed Eve or Pike jumping out of a car and tackling the guy. Penny would be the only one equipped to handle such a situation. Juniper tried another tactic. “It would be a waste of Penny’s time and I can’t afford the extra bucks right now. I have an alarm, and the police are doing extra drive-bys. Time would be better spent talking to possible suspects, which I plan to handle.”

“And when do you think you’ll have time to do that?”

“Today. I hope.”

“Hope is for the weak.” Her voice softened. “We are your friends and we just want to help. Let us help you with something even if it’s just brainstorming ideas or trying to come up with some more suspects.”

Juniper blinked away the tears that suddenly formed in her eyes. She’d met a few generous people in her life, but Pike really took the cake. No pun intended. “Thanks,” Juniper said. “I could use a few new ideas.”

Pike beamed. “How about tonight, then? We could all meet at my house.”

Juniper started to agree, then remembered dinner. “I can’t tonight. I already have plans.”

“You do?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t remember the last time you had plans on a Thursday night.”

“Jack is taking me out for a romantic night on the town.”

Pike clapped her hands together. “That’s wonderful! You guys have hardly seen each other lately. I can tell the absence has been weighing on both of you—especially you. Your sparkle dims whenever he’s not around—always has.”

Juniper scowled at her. “My sparkle is just fine.”

“Okay, whatever you say,” Pike said. “Have fun tonight.” The door chimed, then, and in walked Mallory. Pike leaned over the counter, and whispered to Juniper, “You had better invite me to the wedding.”

Juniper laughed and shook her head. "Yeah, somehow I don't see Jack proposing again." With that, she dropped some cash, grabbed her egg salad sandwich and left.

Outside the cafe, she almost bumped into Rudolph Windsor. Or rather he almost bumped into her. He was walking fast with his eyes glued to his smart phone, not paying attention. Juniper dodged him by jumping to the left and in the process dropped her sandwich bag in the snow. At the last minute, he realized what happened and halted before he tramped on it. "Sorry," he said. "I guess my mind was on something else."

And your eyes. "Nothing bad, I hope."

"Nothing I can't handle."

Juniper bent over to pick her sandwich bag up, but Rudolph beat her to it. Juniper started across the road and Rudolph followed her.

"I'm glad I ran into you," he said, then smiled. "I guess I should say almost ran over you. I've been wanting to talk to you about something."

Juniper paused. "Really?"

"Maybe we could set something up for next week—after Christmas, of course."

Before Juniper could ask what he wanted to talk about, he glanced at his watch and said he had to run. She'd find out, eventually. Juniper dusted some snow from her sandwich bag and had just started up her front steps when Mallory hollered her name.

“Did you forget something?” she called, catching up. Juniper looked at the hat in Mallory’s hands and smiled. “Thanks, my mind has been preoccupied.”

“I saw you talking to Rudolph Windsor. What did he want?”

“Yeah. It was weird. He was in a bit of a hurry, but he said he had something he wanted to talk to me about—that maybe we could get together next week. I can’t imagine what it would be. It’s not like we have anything in common.”

“Maybe he wants to steal you away from Jack.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s it.”

“You never know. I’ve caught him staring at you more than a few times.”

“Really?”

Mallory nodded. “Yep. Anyway, I’ve got to get back to the manor. Who knows what Nana and Dani will get up to without me there to babysit them.”

Thirteen

FINN came into the Inn as Juniper was hanging curtains. "Hey," he said. "I thought I heard you come in." He pointed to the window. "What are you doing?"

"I'm adding the pretty. It's my favorite step."

"I didn't realize there was a step called adding the pretty."

"There is, trust me, and it involves more than you can imagine. Jack is never any help at this point so it's all up to me; Paint. Wallpaper. Color. Rugs. Furniture. Curtains. Pattern. Texture. All of that."

"Is that just for the flips that you keep?"

"No... although I usually just stage the place when we're flipping it. Jack's dad is actually a big help. He helped me pick out the color scheme."

"I guess it would be his area of expertise, being a realtor and all."

Juniper grinned. "Exactly."

"I guess I never thought about how much goes into a house flip or renovation. What made you and Jack start doing this?"

"My dad," Juniper explained. "He's a contractor. I grew up following him around jobsites and loved it."

"Interesting. Where is he now?"

Juniper pretended to check her watch. “Probably on a beach somewhere drinking fruity cocktails with Mom. They moved south when Dad sold the business. They’re flying home New Year’s Day to stay with us for a bit.”

“So, why the Inn, then?” he asked. “Sounds like being a contractor is quite lucrative.”

Juniper laughed. “I don’t know if I agree with that blanket statement. I think Dad got in and out of the business at the right time. As for me, I just wanted something different. Jack and I are still running Spirited Construction so it’s not like we’re giving it up, but I wanted some roots and I’ve always dreamed of running a bed-and-breakfast in wine country. That’s probably what drew me to Jack in the first place; I loved his stories of growing up running through the vineyard.”

“That place is a vision.”

“With the historic home renovation business, we’re always going from town to town and the flips take a long time, so we usually live wherever we’re working.” Juniper could have told him she was thinking about the future and the fact that she wanted children soon, but she thought twice—especially since she hadn’t told Jack as much. “Besides, who wouldn’t fall in love with Bohemian Lake.”

Juniper called it quits for the day around four. They were heading out at six-thirty for dinner. That gave her plenty of time to shower and change. She had no idea where they were going—only that she should dress sexy casual,

which was Jack's way of telling her no jeans or hardhats, which, come to think of it, looked pretty damn sexy on him.

The closer it got to six-thirty, the more nervous Juniper became. By the time she'd discarded her third outfit, she gave up and plopped down on her bed in her underwear, clothes strewn around her. This was crazy. What in the world was wrong with her? Just because her feelings for Jack were intensifying, it didn't have to be scary. Jack didn't even have to know. The thought was rather liberating. Juniper smiled to herself and tugged on the forest green jumpsuit with the side cutouts that had been her first choice. She had just pulled on her boots and a white faux-fur coat from her modeling days when Jack knocked on their bedroom door. He'd been working on an open-concept farmhouse in the next town over.

"Junie, just throw on a paper bag and let's go. You know you'll look amazing in whatever you wear."

Fourteen

JACK'S eyes had bulged from their sockets when he saw her and she was pretty sure his tongue was still hanging out of his mouth as they pulled up to the restaurant.

"Well, was it worth the wait?" Juniper asked.

Jack answered with a kiss.

The place he'd chosen, Marsha's Vineyard, was completely upscale. It was located about half an hour outside of Bohemian Lake. Wine Country, as the natives called it, stretched all around the town and had been touted as a top tourist destination spot last year. The article had said "more often than not, the regions pastoral setting would convince you to toss your map and let the spirit lead," which was true. There were so many tucked-away treasures in the little villages around here: artisanal cheese shops, gourmet hot dogs, wineries, breweries and cafes all dedicated to local ingredients, and Bohemian Lake was smack dab in the middle. Bohemian Lake also happened to be the home of the Poutine Food Truck, famous for serving everything under the sun over French fries and gravy.

Marsha's Vineyard was nothing like Poutine Food Truck, however. It was rustic yet edgy, a purple heritage barn filled with eclectic art and furniture. Jack had made reservations, and the hostess seated them in a booth

halfway between the entrance and the kitchen in the back. Juniper automatically picked up the wine list to check out their selection while Jack was disappointed to find out they didn't carry any of the local craft beer. Juniper barely had time to read the list when a waiter brought over a bottle of champagne.

Juniper looked at Jack in surprise.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I thought a celebration was in order. You know, to celebrate our future together."

Juniper nodded.

The waiter poured and stood beside the table while Jack tested it. Jack nodded to the waiter, so the server set the bottle on the table and leaned over. "Congratulations. I hope you're very happy together."

Juniper smirked while Jack thanked the waiter but didn't bother setting him straight.

Instead Jack raised his flute. "Here's to not one, but two profitable ventures and, more importantly, a long and happy relationship."

They clinked glasses and took sips.

"So, why didn't you correct him?"

Jack's eyes twinkled. "Why would I?"

"He thinks we're engaged."

Jack's grin was wicked. "So? Is that such a revolting idea?"

Juniper's face flamed. "No! Not at all." On the contrary. She'd secretly been wishing that Jack would propose. She

could hardly expect it after she'd rejected him the first time, but the hope lived on. They were getting older and she really wanted a child—Jack's child.

Jack picked up his menu. "It doesn't matter what he thinks. Hell, I got over caring about what people thought a long time ago, you know, when you spurned me in front of all of my family and friends."

Ouch. "Was it that bad?" Juniper asked. Jack hadn't talked to her for a while after the incident.

He made a face. "Only if you consider getting your heart ripped out publicly bad—"

"Got it. You paint a vivid picture. How about now? Would you risk a public shaming again? I'm feeling feisty." Juniper pretended to claw at him like a cat.

He shook his head and smiled. "Nope. I've got you right where I want you and I'm not scaring you away again, no matter how much my mother begs."

Juniper stole peeks at Jack while she perused the menu. His black oxford shirt went nice with his dark features. He had perpetual five-o'clock shadow, which Juniper loved, wide shoulders and muscular arms. Being a contractor was good for the physique. Juniper forced her gaze back to the menu when he caught her staring. "You see something you like, Palmer?"

"Do I? You should see the hunk sitting behind you."

Jack turned his head and laughed at the statue of Santa Clause.

All in all, it was an enjoyably romantic dinner. They talked about next steps for the attic; Feliz was supposed to have lived there with them—in his own apartment—but obviously that wouldn't be happening now. Jack told her about a few new projects Spirited Construction had bid on. Two of them were right in Bohemian Lake so that they would be closer to home.

As they were leaving, his cell phone rang.

Jack frowned when he glanced at the display. Juniper was standing right beside him and caught the caller's name: Sally.

Juniper's stomach dropped.

It was his ex—Big Boobs. He hit the ignore button and pocketed the phone.

"Don't you want to get that?" Juniper asked.

"It's not important."

"But isn't that your—"

"Ex-fiancée," he said before Juniper even had the word out. "Yes. And I'm not interested in anything she has to say." Jack put up a hand. "Before you ask, I don't want to talk about her. So, let's not tarnish the night."

As much as Juniper wanted to question him, she kept her mouth shut. From the set of Jack's jaw, he meant to keep mum on the topic. Juniper couldn't help wondering if he'd seen Big Boobs at all; after all, Bohemian Lake wasn't that big of a place. Juniper told herself to mind her own business. He would tell her eventually. She hoped.

Fifteen

FRIDAY was usually a busy day in downtown Bohemian Lake and today was no exception. The snow was swirling and people were in the mood to Christmas shop or at least pick up last minute goods. 'Twas the season for parties and baking, after all.

The line in the café was all the way out the door, so instead of waiting she headed across the road to the Gothic Haunt. She put on a pot of coffee and snacked on some cheese and almonds while she waited for it to brew. Properly fortified, she returned to the parlor. She had two interviews scheduled for waitstaff, but the first one wasn't for hours.

As busy as she'd been for the last couple of days, she hadn't had much time to do any investigating. Her stakeout attempt had been a bust. It had been almost a week since Feliz died, and she was no Nancy Drew. She needed to do better. Part of her problem was that she didn't have any real suspects.

Evan Cross was the only one who had made any kind of a threat. Who else was there? Juniper could definitely rule out Pike. What about Louise and the cheese argument? Juniper couldn't see that, either. She thought about her book group members. Eve was cranky, but that was it. Mallory and Dani wouldn't hurt a fly. And Nana—well, she was Mallory's grandmother. No way. Pike had mentioned Rocco Deer, but

Juniper couldn't see him as a killer, either. What reason would any of them have for not wanting the taproom to open?

Juniper needed to question the only person who had a reason to keep them from opening. She grabbed her purse, locked the Inn, and headed down the front walkway.

Louise Olivet was just coming out of the Chic Bohemian Antique as she approached the sidewalk. Louise's hands were empty. Juniper never left that store with empty hands. In fact, she had avoided going in there lately because it was too tempting. The store had everything from rare antique furniture, clocks and paintings to modern-day jewelry. She called Louise's name to say hello but Louise must not have heard her.

Guitars and Cadillacs was located a good block and a half from the Gothic Haunt on a side street that crossed Maine. The exterior was a throwback to another era. It was apparent that it hadn't been cleaned since then, either. Above the door was a neon sign with the bar's name.

Juniper paused before going in. She didn't expect Sally's boyfriend, Evan, to welcome her with open arms. She only hoped he wouldn't toss her to the curb. She took a deep breath and opened the door. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior, which was even less attractive than the exterior—if that was even possible. Juniper was pretty sure any loss of patrons wouldn't be her fault. Evan's customers—all four of them—sat at the bar on ancient chrome and vinyl bar stools. The men looked like

they'd been there since the last war they'd fought in. They didn't even turn around to see who'd come in.

Juniper crossed the worn out floor, intending to ask the men where she could find Evan when he pushed through a swinging door at the far side of the bar. He was carrying a tray of beer mugs, which he set none too gently on the counter when he saw her.

"You got a lot of nerve showing your face here," he said. "Come by to steal a few customers?"

Juniper bit her tongue to keep from commenting on the lack of customers. "I just wanted to stop by to say hello, Mr. Cross. I'd like us to be friends."

"Yeah?" He glared at her. "Well, I'd like a million dollars but there's no magical genie here. Now get the hell out of my place. Better yet, get out of my neighborhood. We don't need another bar here." He turned to the men eating pickled eggs on the stools. "Right guys?"

The men mumbled something unintelligible.

"Mr. Cross, I'm not opening to compete with you or anyone else. There's plenty of room."

"You're wrong about that. All I hear is everyone yapping their jaws about your new place, talking about how you saved the Doctor's mansion, about how nice it'll be to have an Inn and taproom with craft beer and hoity-toity wine from the local vineyards." He used air quotes around vineyards. "Well, I got news for you." He shook his index finger at her.

"Mr. Cross—"

"I don't know why you are so determined to ruin my business."

One of the men at the bar turned around. "Hey, Evan. Cut the girl some slack. She's just trying to make a living."

Evan ignored him. "I serve beer from real breweries. The ones that've been around for more years than you've been alive. If you think you can force me to start serving your sissy cider beer and fancy finger foods, you're out of your mind."

One of the men laughed. "I bet her fancy finger food is better than the pickled swill you serve here."

Evan grabbed a hammer from under the ledge and slammed it down on the bar, shattering one of his glasses. "If you don't like my food then I suggest you get out. I don't need your business anymore."

"Come on, Evan," the first man said. "Don't be a donkey."

"Get out, all of you."

No one moved.

"Now!"

He didn't need to tell Juniper again. She turned and started for the door as the four men slid off their stools.

She was almost to the door when someone seized her arm. Startled, Juniper froze, then turned to look. It was Sally, with her black hair styled and hair sprayed to within an inch of the ozone's life, a hair helmet, surrounding a perfectly made-up smug face. Her voice was low but mean. "Just so

you know, Jack and I aren't over! You may think we are, but I still see him plenty."

Before Juniper could respond, Evan approached. Perhaps he'd heard what she said and didn't like it. "Don't you ever come in here again," he said, practically spitting the words. Then he turned to Sally and his eyes were dark, "I think you and I need to talk."

Juniper's heart pounded as she tore away from Sally's grasp and almost ran outside. She stopped on the sidewalk and rubbed her arm where Sally had grabbed her. Evan Cross had already been at the top of her suspect list, and now she could add Sally to that list, as well.

Juniper tried to get back to work, but she couldn't concentrate. She was too busy thinking about what Sally had said. Could it be true? Jack had been away so much lately. What if he'd changed his mind about Sally and he was really staying with her all those nights? Her thoughts were interrupted by the brunette in front of her as she introduced herself. Jasmine Balthazar was Juniper's first interview of the day and, after only half an hour, Juniper liked everything about her.

"When can you start?" Juniper asked.

"I can start now if you'd like. I've been out of work for a little while now," Jasmine said.

They decided she wouldn't need much training other than to learn the menu and the beer and wine list they'd be serving, but there was plenty she could help Finn with. After Jasmine left, Juniper went to her parlor and made some more

phone calls and set up a few more interviews. Juniper then talked to several suppliers and verified deliveries. It seemed like everything was coming together for the opening. Now they just needed a pass from the building inspector. In all of the drama lately, she'd completely forgotten. Time to harass the building inspector.

Sixteen

THE smell of cinnamon and nutmeg permeated the air. The next day was Christmas Eve, and the cafe was as busy as Santa's workshop. The last minute shoppers needed their caffeine fix in order to hit the shops. Customers stood three-deep at the counter but it didn't faze Pike at all. She dished up coffee and treats in her festive red Santa's hat and chatted them all up, and no one seemed to be grumpy while waiting. Juniper must have been the last customer of the morning rush. When it was finally her turn, she was the only one left.

"I'm so happy I didn't run into Evan this morning."

"Don't let him bother you. He's all talk."

"Then explain to me why he threatened me when I stopped by his place yesterday, and Sally grabbed my arm." Juniper told her what happened.

Pike frowned. "Evan has always been a little grouchy, but neither of them have ever laid a hand on anyone except for drunks who got out of hand in the bar."

"Grouchy doesn't begin to describe the way he acted. And Sally tried to tell me she's still seeing Jack."

"Say what? She's as artificial as their Christmas tree. Don't believe her. Do you want me to talk to Evan for you?" Pike asked.

Juniper shook her head. "That's not a good idea. If he is the one who killed Feliz—"

"You really believe that?"

"Sally and the Grinch are the only ones who have threatened me. I haven't talked to everyone yet, but no one else seems to be dead set against an Inn and taproom in the neighborhood."

"I wouldn't say there's no one else."

"Who, then?"

"Wait here." Pike disappeared into the back of the store and returned with a red sheet of paper. "There's at least one other person who doesn't like what you're doing."

She passed the paper across the top of the glass cafe case and Juniper read it. It was a poster for the Bohemian Lake Historical Society; the first sentence read:

Stop the destruction of the Doctor's House.

Juniper looked at Pike and raised an eyebrow.

"Keep reading," she said.

The historic Victorian mansion on Main Street is being turned into an Inn and Taproom and is scheduled to open soon. The Doctor's house has decorated the Bohemian Lake area for over a century and is the site of some of the town's most tragic and fascinating history! It must be granted landmark status by any means necessary. Come to the meeting and help us make this possible. It's not too late!

Juniper recognized the name at the bottom of the page. "Oh, Hatti," Juniper said.

"You know Hatti Dustfeather?"

"I met her in the fall when I was researching the house. She was a nervous lady, but she was very helpful to me. I guess she's upset that we've decided to turn the house into an Inn and Taproom and not a museum."

"We already have a museum."

"I know but I guess because of the murders, she wants it memorialized."

"Well an Inn and Taproom will bring in more revenue than a second museum. No wonder the council turned her down." She pointed to the paper in Juniper's hands. "What do you think she's up to now?"

"I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out."

"Does this mean Evan is off your list?"

"Not at all," Juniper said. "He's still at the top along with the devil's hand-maiden, but Hatti Dustfeather is a close third."

"So, you're going to the meeting?"

"I sure am. Care to join me?"

Pike grinned. "Wouldn't miss it for the world!"

Juniper had a feeling she wasn't going to like what they had to say, but she needed to find out what this group was up to.

They chatted for a few more minutes while Juniper paid for her sandwich and soup. Juniper interrogated Pike about her recent time spent with Finn. She claimed nothing had happened between them but Juniper could tell she was lying.

When Juniper got outside, she noticed that all of the businesses up and down the street—with the exception of hers, of course—had bright red papers stuck in their door handles. The snow had slowed, but some of the posters were soggy from the snow. It didn't bode well for a large turnout—not that Juniper expected many of her neighbors to go. It would be interesting to see who did.

After hanging her purse and coat up, she took her food to the kitchen and warmed it up in the microwave, then went back to her desk. Jasmine was due in at eleven, and Juniper worked on getting all the necessary paperwork ready for her to sign. When Juniper had everything in order, she went upstairs to arrange the furniture, choose bedding and put the final touches on decor.

This was the part of her job she liked the best. It was so peaceful here and there was a lingering scent of paint and fresh laundry in the air. Juniper checked the linen closet and made sure everything was neat. Everything was as it should be. She didn't have time to mop, but she vacuumed the new oriental rugs in each room. Then she went into the cellar and brought up a case of wine to fill the lobby wine racks. Juniper wondered if she'd ever stop seeing Feliz on the floor.

The morning passed quickly. Finn came in at ten. He had two part-time kitchen workers coming in for training. When Jasmine came in at eleven, she introduced her to Finn and showed her around. After the tour, Jasmine and Juniper returned to her parlor. "One of your first duties will be to

learn about the wines and beers we'll be serving here. You'll need to know as much about them as you do the food in order to pair correctly. Many of the people who come in here will know a lot about craft beer and Spanish wine and they'll expect you to know more than they do." Juniper slid a sample menu across the desk.

With Finn occupied in the kitchen and Jasmine reorganizing the area where they'd be storing menus, napkins, and the like, it was time to talk to more neighbors.

Seventeen

B OHEMIAN Lake's Hardware Store was located next door to Guitars and Cadillacs. Juniper hoped Evan was busy inside the bar and didn't have a sudden need for another hammer. Fern and Ron Baron, her neighbors were the hardware store's owners. She knew Fern and her daughter quite well from the October incident when they'd found Lulu's husband unconscious on the hill, but she'd only met Ron a handful of times. The small store was packed full of everything imaginable, which was great news for a contractor. Juniper practically lived in hardware stores. Yes, they had suppliers, but they were always running out of something.

Juniper picked her way down a narrow aisle to where Ron Baron stood behind a paint counter with a phone receiver wedged between his shoulder and his ear as he flipped through an instruction manual. Fern, on the other side of the store, was helping a customer with what appeared to be a rather large order. From the sound of the conversation, he was clearly having issues with a piece of equipment. It was hard not to notice how his eye twitched with every word he spoke. Thankfully Ron hung up the phone before Juniper got caught staring.

"Well, if it isn't our neighbor, the newest renovator-turned-hotel-owner," he said.

There was an odd note to his voice, but Juniper couldn't put her finger on what it was.

"What can I get for you?" he asked.

That was definitely a tone Juniper hadn't heard him use before. "Actually, I'm here to see you if you have a minute."

"Only one, sure."

"I was wondering if you've noticed anyone creeping around the Inn. In particular, I was wondering if you've seen Evan Cross around my place?"

Mr. Baron crossed his arms over his ugly Christmas sweater. "You got a problem with Evan? Or do you simply enjoy starting rumors?"

"I'm not trying to stir up trouble, Ron."

"It's Mr. Baron, to you. You should be ashamed of yourself. I thought you were a nice young lady, but—"

"Sorry, Mr. Baron, but somebody has been messing with my place—"

He shook his finger at her. "Evan has been a good neighbor to me for more years than you. That bar is his livelihood—and now you came along. I thought he was wrong about you trying to drive his business away, but I see now that he wasn't. And stealing Sally's fiancé, well... that's none of my business but, since you're in here making it my business, I think it was low."

"Whoa. Hold on a minute." Juniper placed her palms on the counter, mainly to keep her hands from shaking. "I think someone's been yanking your tinsel." Juniper steadied

her voice, doing her best to keep it calm and measured. “Mr. Baron, I have never done anything to either of them. For some reason, Evan has gotten it into his head that I’m out to get him. Nothing could be further from the truth. I went to see him yesterday to try to smooth things over. And I never stole Jack from Sally. If anything, Sally stole him from me after college and she threatened me—not the other way around.”

“Likely story.”

“It’s true,” Juniper said. “Both Evan Cross and Sally Snaub have threatened me in one way or another and I can’t help but wonder if one of them murdered my friend and chef, Feliz.”

Mr. Baron’s eyes narrowed. “I thought your chef died in an accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident,” Juniper said. “Someone killed him.”

“Now you’re being a drama queen. If it was a murder, Cody or Kaden would have mentioned something.”

“Not necessarily.” Juniper was kicking herself for opening her big mouth.

“Right.” Mr. Baron’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “Even if, for some reason, the Mabels didn’t get wind of a murder, Sally and Evan had nothing to do with it. They’d never kill anyone.”

“Then why did they threaten me?”

“Perhaps you waltzed into their business and agitated them. Seems to me, you’re good at that. Now, if you’ll

excuse me, I have work to do,” Ron Baron said as he stomped away into the back.

“That went well,” Juniper mumbled to herself as she passed by a confused-looking Fern on the way outside. She’d gone there to find out more about Sally and Evan. Instead, she now had another person who hated her. Juniper turned the corner onto Main Street and headed to her next destination.

Eighteen

LOUISE was arranging a new display in the window of Let It Brie, when Juniper walked by. Louise motioned for her to come in, and then darted to the back of the shop, returning with the bright red poster Hatti Dustfeather had passed out.

“Did you see this drivel?” she asked.

“Pike showed it to me this morning. Are you going to the meeting?” Juniper said.

Louise nodded. “Definitely. And I’m sure Rudy will, too.” Her voice softened and there was a hint of a blush in her cheeks when she said his name.

Juniper put two and two together. “I didn’t know you and Rudolph were seeing each other.”

The blush became more pronounced. “Is it that obvious?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “We’re keeping it hush-hush for now.” She smiled. “Actually, I’d like to shout it from the rooftops, but Rudolph thinks we should be discreet—you know how people gossip. He’s afraid it would affect our businesses.”

Juniper wasn’t sure how any gossip could possibly affect them, but that sounded like Rudolph. Image meant a lot to him. Louise didn’t exactly fit with Rudolph’s polished look. “Your secret’s safe with me,” Juniper said.

They talked another minute before Juniper was able to make her exit and go next door.

Peace and Light was a new age shop. It had everything from crystals and harps to nose rings and herbs, but it was known for the fortune telling. Star St. James, the proprietor, was a white witch, according to her business cards. She was slender and a head taller than Juniper. Probably in better shape, too. She was very good friends with the Vianu family out at Caravan Manor. As a matter of fact, it was Nana or Mallory who did the readings; Star set up the appointments and the Vianu's fulfilled them.

Star sat on the scuffed hardwood floor, unpacking crystals, tarot cards and necklaces from the cardboard box in front of her. "Hi, Junie," she said, jumping to her feet.

"You didn't have to get up," Juniper said.

"Yes, I did. My butt was getting numb." A strand of white hair came loose from her fishtail braid and she tucked it behind her ear. "What can I do for you?"

Now that Juniper was here, she wasn't sure how to ask what she wanted to ask. Then Juniper spotted the infamous red poster in the trash can beside the cardboard box. It was covered with discarded cellophane wrappers, but the bright color stood out. Juniper pointed at the can. "I see you got one of those, too."

"I put it exactly where it belongs." Star shook her head. "Such nonsense."

"Does that mean you're not going to the meeting?"

"I might have if I didn't already have plans."

“Will you be able to make it to my place on Christmas? We’re going to toast Feliz.”

“I’d like to, but I have a family dinner.” She made a face. “’Tis the season for holiday obligations and all that, right?”

“Of course,” Juniper said. This was her opportunity. “I had one other question for you. Have you noticed any unusual activity around the Inn at night?”

“What do you mean by unusual? Paranormal?”

Juniper told her about some of the vandalism that had occurred. She didn’t mention Evan’s name though. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake she had with Ron Baron.

Star tilted her head as she thought about it. “I can’t say that I have. I haven’t seen anyone in the neighborhood who doesn’t belong here. And I haven’t seen anyone paying particular attention to your place.”

Juniper was disappointed, although she’d figured that’s what her answer would be. No one had seen anything. Juniper bought a couple of crystals that were supposed to be for protection and a packet of herbs.

When Star finished ringing up her purchase, she said, “I just thought of something. I doubt it means anything though.”

She’d take what she could get at this point.

“It was a day last week when I was closing up. A guy was in front of the taproom. He tried the door, and when he found it was locked, he rattled it a few times. Then he looked

in the window—I guess to be sure you were really closed, then he left.”

She was right. It was nothing.

“I didn’t think anything of it.”

Juniper perked up a bit. “Was it Jack? Do you remember what he looked like?”

Star shrugged. “He looked vaguely familiar, like I’d seen him in the neighborhood before, but definitely not Jack. I wouldn’t be able to pick him out of a lineup though.”

“Do you remember what he was wearing?”

“A red tweed coat and a black toque.”

A wave of excitement went through Juniper. She’d seen that same coat on Evan Cross in the cafe.

Nineteen

LIKE it or not, she was going to have to pay the Guitars and Cadillacs another visit. Juniper was itching to go now, but the rest of her day was booked. Plus, after the last incident, she wasn't about to go alone. Wednesday was the night the alarm had gone off and someone had tampered with the Christmas tree and stolen the presents. It couldn't be a coincidence that Evan had tried to get in that same week.

When Juniper got back to the taproom, Jasmine was polishing the bar to a shine and the aroma of whatever Finn was cooking made her mouth water.

"I hope you don't mind," Jasmine said. "I finished my other project and needed something else to do."

"Let me see. Do I mind that someone is cleaning besides me?" Juniper tapped a finger to her lips and pretended to think about it.

Jasmine laughed. "I guess not."

"Seriously," Juniper said. "It looks great. You don't have to work so hard on your first day, though. There will be plenty for you to impress me with once we open."

"I don't mind. I like keeping busy."

Juniper's stomach growled just then. "Have you eaten lunch yet?" When Jasmine shook her head, Juniper suggested they go and see what Finn was up to.

Finn stood over the stove and Juniper immediately recognized what he was making when she saw the seafood steaming. "Paella?"

Finn grinned. "You guessed it. You ladies are just in time to taste some." He wiped his hands on a towel, then lifted the cover from a pan that sat on the warmer. The aroma of shrimp and saffron filled the air.

Jasmine closed her eyes and breathed deeply. "That looks like jambalaya or gumbo. I think I may never leave work again."

Finn heaped some of the Paella into two bowls, added spoons, and passed a bowl to each of them. "Enjoy."

Juniper took a spoonful of the rice, mixed with shrimp, tomatoes, chicken and garlic. The texture was perfect. And the taste? Juniper cleared her plate in record time. So did Jasmine.

Finn handed each of them a glass of wine. "Have a sip and let me know if it pairs well."

The wine was definitely a Rioja, a classic Spanish wine made primarily from Tempranillo grapes. "Perfect."

"Now have a bite and try this one." He handed them another sampling of wine.

"What is it?" Jasmine asked.

Finn grinned. "Drink it and find out."

Juniper took another bite of the paella, getting some rabbit this time mixed with the seafood and rice, and then she took a sip. The flavor was familiar, a chilled dry rosé from Navarra.

“Oh, wow. This is good too,” Jasmine said smacking her lips together.

Juniper agreed. Both wines would pair well. “Finn, this is fantastic. You really know what you’re doing.”

“I hoped you’d say that,” he said. “I’ll confess, Spanish cuisine wasn’t my forte, but I’m enjoying learning and experimenting with it.”

They talked about how to add the new items to the menu without having to reprint everything and decided they’d put the new foods on a black board at the entrance. Instead of adding everything at once, they’d run specials and have different ones each day.

Then Juniper went upstairs to see Jack, who was working on the attic. He was just finishing up when his phone, which he’d set on the floor, rang. “Can you see who that is?” he said. “My hands are messy.”

Juniper peeked at the display. “Unlisted.”

“Ignore it, then. There’s no one I want to talk to this late, anyway.”

By the time he’d finished and dried his hands, the phone rang again and once again he didn’t answer. When it happened a third time, he snatched the phone off the floor and snapped, “Who the hell is this?”

His fingers tightened on the phone and he jammed his other hand into the pocket of his pants. He wasn’t happy about whoever was calling him.

“Sally. This isn’t a good time.”

Definitely not a telemarketer. Juniper motioned to Jack that she'd be downstairs and left him to talk to his ex in peace. Not that Juniper wanted to. She'd rather have listened in on the whole conversation, but it really wasn't any of her business. Jack had made it clear it was over with her. If he wanted Juniper to know why she was calling, he'd tell her.

And Juniper didn't believe a word of that. What if he still had feelings for his ex? She could have been calling to say she was sorry, and she wanted him back.

Jack caught up to her on the stairs. "Sorry about that."

"That's all right."

He pulled her into his arms. "That was Sally."

"I heard."

"She borrowed a friend's phone since I wasn't taking her calls. If I had known it was her, I wouldn't have answered."

"You can't avoid her forever."

"No, but I can try. So let's get moving, shall we?"

By the end of the day, Jack and Juniper had moved some of the furniture upstairs. Juniper had hired a waiter, and Finn had hired another cook. Things were progressing nicely.

Twenty

C HRISTMAS Eve came in, suitably, with a storm and just in time for Jack's family dinner. After picking up Pike and Finn, Juniper watched Jack as he steered his truck down the long, winding snow-covered road that led around the lake and into wine country. Lovely Christmas tunes blasted from the radio, but Juniper's mind was still focused on Sally and Evan, and whether or not she should have reported the incident to the police. Of course, there wasn't much they could do about it. They would advise her to stay away from Evan and Sally and that wouldn't help her find proof that Evan was responsible for the sabotage or for her friend's death. Oh well, time to move on. She leaned her head back and stared out the window.

Fat fluffy snowflakes fell faster now than when they'd first left, but what the heck, it only added to the charm.

Half an hour later, Jack, Juniper, Pike and Finn pulled through the gates. The trees gave way and a beautiful snowcapped farmhouse appeared. The spruce trees on the front lawn were all decorated with oversized twinkling balls and multi-colored lights, and eight huge reindeer pulled Santa across the roof.

"Here we are. Home sweet home," Jack said.

"Wow." Finn exclaimed. This place still looks like a Christmas postcard.

Jack's parents lived in an eighteenth-century farmhouse on the vineyard just outside Bohemian Lake, not too far from Caravan Manor. His brother also had a house on the property, which was nice because it meant there was always plenty of room for everyone. It didn't matter the occasion or the time of the year—rain, heat, or snow. The Youngs were firm believers in the build a longer table way of life and everyone in Bohemian Lake was welcome in their home.

They'd just gotten out of the truck when Jack Sr. trotted out the front door.

"It's about time you arrived," he said. "Here, let me take this, my dear," he said, unloading the basket of presents from Juniper's arms.

Juniper walked back over to the car and retrieved some of the sweet treats Pike had baked while Jack grabbed a large box containing four growlers of winter-spiced IPA brewed with ginger and pine needles that they'd nabbed from one of their friends at the local brewery.

Finn held the front door for Jack, since he was carrying the beer, and they stopped in the front hallway to undress. Jack cut through the dining room on the right and out the French doors to the patio, where Juniper was sure a cooler would be ready for the beer. Opposite the dining room was the living room, and just beyond that was a stairway to the second floor. The hallway continued past the staircase to the kitchen at the back of the house, which was where Juniper headed.

Jacks mom, Ginger was at the sink rinsing some dishes and watching her granddaughters build a snowman through the picture window. She jumped when Juniper came up behind her and gave her a hug.

Ginger was beautiful and one of the only things that gave away her age was her silvering hair. She refused to color it—she said it gave her character. “You really shouldn’t sneak up on an old girl like that,” she said with a smile. She dried her hands and pulled Juniper in for another hug.

“Well if I see an old girl then I’ll try to remember that.” Juniper put the pan of brownies on the counter.

“Oh, Junie,” she said when they finished. “I am so sorry.”

They sat across from each other with a box of tissues between them. “I still can’t quite believe it,” Juniper said.

“You’ve had quite the month. Just the thought of what Kaden told me...” She shuddered and reached for Juniper’s hand. “Such a tragic accident.”

So Kaden hadn’t mentioned Juniper’s suspicions to her. Either he’d completely dismissed them or he just didn’t want her to worry.

Juniper snatched up another tissue and passed the box to Ginger. She took one and patted it under her eyes.

“Now, what can I help with?”

“Not a thing. The turkey’s in the oven with all the trimmings and I already have all of the sides made.” Ginger folded the towel she’d been holding and placed it on the counter. “I am so glad you came today. How are you?”

Juniper thought she was done with tears, but there was something about Ginger asking her how she was that made her swallow hard before answering. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure about that?"

Juniper nodded. "I won't say it's been easy, but it's getting better."

Ginger opened a package of lettuce. "If I know you, you'll be just fine. I've never yet seen you fail at anything."

"I hope so," Juniper mumbled.

"What does that mean, sweetie?"

"I just feel a little distant from Jack lately. Sally's been calling him—"

"She has?" Ginger stopped shredding the lettuce. "Well, he loves you. Always has!"

"Yes. Maybe. It's just I saw Sally yesterday, and she told me that she was still seeing Jack."

"Did you ask him?"

"Not yet. I'm sure she's lying. She's always been the vindictive type but it just messes with my head. Especially since I was already wondering about us."

"Wondering about what?"

"Whether or not he'll ever have the courage to ask me to marry him again."

"Of course he will. He's just a little gun-shy now. Can you pass me the bacon and croutons, dear?"

Juniper did as she was told.

"Have you told him that you want to get married—that might help."

"I've hinted."

Ginger began chopping the bacon. "Well, we do live in a modern era now, my dear. You could always ask him."

That hadn't even crossed her mind. "That's true."

"Of course he's kind of old fashioned so I'm not sure he'd appreciate my advice." Ginger smiled. "But who cares what he likes, right?"

"Who cares what who likes?" Kaden crossed the kitchen and put his arm around Ginger and pecked her on the cheek.

"Never you mind, nephew, this is not official police business," Ginger said.

"Isn't it about time you two get hitched?" Kaden surprised her with his answer.

"Eavesdropper." Ginger accused.

"How is it working out with Finn?" Kaden asked.

The kitchen door opened and Finn burst in.

"Uh-oh. I think I just heard my name. That can't be good."

Ginger and Juniper laughed. "I was just about to tell everyone what a horrible employee you are," Juniper said.

"Oh no. They'd never believe you. I'm like a surrogate son," Finn said.

Ginger chuckled. "Yes, the son I never wanted. Can I get you something, Finn?"

"I just came to get a hug," he said.

Ginger grinned and held her arms out. "Always the little charmer. How about you save some of that charm for

that sweet girl who came in with you?"

"Who, Pike?"

Ginger smirked at me. "When are you two gonna stop playing coy and just get together already?"

"How do you know we're not together?" He said on the sly, and walked away.

"Finn," Juniper shouted.

"Finnegan. You get back here and spill it, young man." Ginger exclaimed.

After dinner—they all sat in front of the fire with glasses of the vineyard's red label that Jack's brother had brought and opened presents. They chatted about lots of things including a trip Jack's brother had taken his parents on in September to a beautiful moated manor in England. It had the largest surviving series of priest holes in the country and a rare collection of original Elizabethan wall paintings. They only touched on Feliz Merlot's death when Kaden said he'd be joining them for the toast to Feliz the following evening. It was a peaceful afternoon and just what Juniper needed. Surrounded by the cocoon of Jack's family, she could almost forget the events of the past week.

At one point, she looked over at Finn, and for a second Juniper thought she caught him exchanging a look with Pike, but he turned his head so fast Juniper wasn't sure. She'd have to grill Pike later.

Jack and Juniper were the last ones to leave that evening. Pike and Finn had caught an earlier ride with

Kaden. Juniper helped Ginger in the kitchen while Jack chopped firewood in the yard. When everything was spic-and-span, Jack loaded up the truck with the overindulgent presents, and the leftovers Ginger insisted they take.

“That was fun,” Juniper said as they headed home.

Jack nodded. “It was. It’s been a long time since Christmas dinner was that enjoyable.”

“You mean you didn’t enjoy taking Sally?”

There was an awkward silence, then he said, “About the other night... there’s something I need to talk to you about,”

Juniper swallowed, her pulse picking up speed like the little drummer boy.

“First of all, I should apologize. It was supposed to be a special night and that phone call from my ex ruined it.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It was a nice dinner. Besides, I was the spoilsport. So, did your mom tell you what I told her?”

“She did and thank goodness. Why didn’t you just talk to me, Junie?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t want to give her the satisfaction. If I questioned you then it meant on some level that I believed her.”

“And do you?”

“I’ll reserve judgement until I hear your side of things.”

Jack laughed. “You’ve been anyone’s fool. Sally hasn’t taken our breakup well and yes, she calls me and

occasionally shows up at my jobsite. That's obviously what she meant by she still sees me. Nothing has happened between us, in case you were wondering, and I did finally have to threaten to get a restraining order. That's probably what made her so mad that day she lashed out at you."

Juniper nodded. "So, you don't have any feelings left for her?"

Jack smiled. "How can you even ask me that? I broke it off with Sally because I was still in love with you and that's a hard pill for her to swallow. But there's something else we need to talk about."

"What?"

"All of this vandalism and murder. I wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but the truth is I'm a little worried that she's unbalanced and maybe she is the one coming after you... and anyone she associates with me and the Inn."

"Are you serious? I can't believe Sally would kill anyone—even after the vicious arm grab."

"I didn't want to believe it at first, either," Jack said. "I thought she was moving on. She said she'd started dating someone new but now that I look back on it, I think she was just trying to make me jealous." Juniper put her hand on Jack's leg as they pulled onto their street. "There have been signs that she's breaking down mentally. I just didn't see them. Or maybe I didn't want to see them."

"Like what?"

"She started leaving these letters for you on your truck. I used to find them first and destroy them. I didn't

want you worrying.”

“What sort of letters.”

“Threats.” Jack said as she shut off the engine.

They both opened their doors and got out.

“Jack, I hate to say it, but maybe we need to tell your cousin.”

“I know. I just feel so guilty. Like this is all my fault. I don’t want her locked away but I don’t want her hurting people, especially you.” He reached for Juniper’s hand and leaned her against the truck. “I think what set me off the other night is that she’s still trying to control me by threatening to hurt herself or you. She thinks—well, it doesn’t matter what she thinks. I’m done with her. And you know what, I’m not going to let her ruin another night with you.” He leaned down and kissed her.

Juniper felt herself grinning stupidly as his lips trailed down her neck.

“Come on, let’s go inside to bed. I’ll come back out for the presents after. I think we’ve had far too much talk tonight.”

“And not enough action,” Juniper agreed.

Twenty One

THE toast to Feliz was in full swing. Finn had made enough appetizers to feed a small army and Pike must have made a trip across the road because there was also a platter of reindeer shaped sugar cookies. Old Christmas carols played throughout the taproom while people mingled. Juniper and Pike had made a large display with photos of Feliz and red and white candles burned in honor of him.

Juniper crossed the room and went behind the bar where Jack was placing fresh glasses near the taps. He looked handsome in his Christmas-themed tie.

“Merry Christmas, my love. How about you pour me one of those cinnamon ciders everyone’s raving about?”

“Will do. Does this mean I’m the bartender for the night?”

“What an excellent idea. You’re hired.” Juniper said smarmily and swatted his backside.

“That’s sexual harassment, you know. I’m calling HR.”

“What? There’s mistletoe right there. I was just being festive.”

Jack grabbed her and pulled her in for a kiss. “I have news for you, Palmer, that’s not what you do under the mistletoe.”

Juniper winked as she pulled away and made the rounds, moving from table to table to make sure everyone

had something to eat. It warmed her heart to know that many people had cared about Feliz.

Pike, the Vianu ladies and Louise—sans Rudolph—sat at a table together. Cody, Penny, Penny's father, Eve Banter, and the Mabels were at the table next to them. Of course, Cross, Snaub and the Baron family were absent. Juniper would have truly been shocked to see them here.

Jasmine and some of the other staff took over for Jack behind the bar, fussing over food and drinks. Allowing Jack to be at Juniper's side. On the rare occasion that they got separated, he'd wink at her from across the room and then return promptly, lacing his fingers through hers so she knew he was there.

Later when it had quieted down, she approached Kaden. "I've been asking the neighbors some questions."

"What kind of questions?" Kaden leaned against the bar and crossed his arms.

"About the vandalism. If anyone saw anything. Things like that."

"And?" His tone of voice told her he wasn't happy about it.

Juniper filled him in on what Star had told her the other day. "I'm sure it was Evan Cross."

Kaden sighed. "Junie, that description could fit any number of men. Just because Cross kind of fits doesn't mean it was him."

"Maybe not, but combine that with the threats he made—"

“Threats?” Kaden straightened up. “You didn’t tell me about any threats.”

“I’m telling you now.” Sort of. She was going to leave out some things. Most things. “Sally doesn’t like me very much. She’s told everyone I stole Jack and now I’m after Evan’s customers. I went to the bar to talk to him, and they threw me out.”

“They threw you out?”

She nodded. When he didn’t say anything right away, she said, “So, what do you think? It has to be him, right?”

Kaden let out a long breath. “Not necessarily.” Juniper opened her mouth to disagree, and he put up his hand. “Hear me out. It could very well be that Cross is involved, but there’s also a chance he’s not. Just because he tried your door, doesn’t mean he broke in later. Maybe he wanted to stop and talk to you.”

“I’m the last person on earth he wants to talk to. He made that clear. I’m sure he’s the one breaking into the taproom.”

“I know you are, Junie.” He smiled sympathetically. “But like I said, there are dozens of red coats and black hats. Unless I can prove it’s Cross, and prove that he broke in, there’s not much I can do about it.”

No matter what Kaden thought, she was convinced Evan had been the one Star had seen. Kaden wanted proof—well, she’d see that he got it. Tomorrow she’d make another visit to the Guitars and Cadillacs.

Juniper turned to Pike and Jack's mother. "Thanks for helping Finn with the food."

"It's the least I can do," Ginger said. "He's quite a cook. I was impressed."

"He's very impress—" Pike stopped herself.

Ginger had a twinkle in her eye. "You two seem to be getting along nicely."

Trying to save face, Pike said, "He's an asset to the Gothic Haunt."

Ginger smiled. "That's not what I meant, but yes, he seems to be." She squeezed Pike's hand. "You should let him know."

"I've already told him he's a good chef."

"Not that. Let him know how you feel. He likes you, Pike."

"Like a sister, maybe," she grumbled.

Juniper spotted Finn coming their way. He looked good in his dress shirt and chinos. "Let's drop this, okay?" Pike said to Ginger.

Kaden finally spoke up. "You could do a lot worse, you know."

"Thanks for everything," Juniper said as she went to intercept Finn. "Your food is a big hit."

"You're welcome. It was nice to have Pike helping me."

That certainly wasn't a brotherly remark. Could Ginger be right? "You couldn't handle her, Valentine."

"Oh, really?"

Juniper tried to hold back a grin. “Especially if your game is as bad as it was in college. As I recall, you never made a move on her then, either. Too busy playing in your garage band.”

“Ouch, Palmer. Cut a guy some slack, would you?”

Juniper laughed and took a seat in the empty chair next to the deli owner, Rocco Deer, thanking him for coming.

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” he said. “Feliz was a good guy.”

“Yes, he was.”

“Amen,” Mallory said, taking a seat at their table.

Rocco waved an arm. “Your place is fabulous. Looking at it now, it’s hard to believe it was just an empty run-down shell. I’m so glad you decided to stay.”

“Why would you think I wouldn’t stay?”

“I heard you were putting the place up for sale.”

Pike chimed in. “Who in the jingle bells is spreading that crap? Junie isn’t going anywhere.”

Louise had mentioned something similar when she’d gone to see her last week. Juniper glanced across the table at her; she was texting furiously on her cell phone.

Rocco thought for a moment. “It was probably someone talking about it in the deli.” He smiled. “I hear a lot of things that way.”

Sally came to mind but her method was more hands-on than that. Then the lightbulb came on—Hatti. If she started a rumor Juniper was leaving, she’d be able to drum up support for her museum idea. “If you happen to

remember,” Juniper said to Rocco, “would you let me know? I’d kind of like to set them straight.”

“Will do.” He stood. “I really have to get going.” Juniper thanked him again, and he promised to be back for the opening.

Things wound down after that. Ginger and Pike helped Finn clean up in the kitchen while Kaden watched the kids. Jack and Juniper put the taproom and bar area back in order. With the popularity of the cinnamon ciders and Spanish wine tonight, she needed to restock the bar. It could wait until tomorrow, but Juniper figured she might as well get it over with. Especially since Jack offered to help her. Juniper made her way down the foyer hall. From the direction of the basement, she heard the soft thud of a door closing.

Her senses went on high alert. Was someone in the cellar? She approached the basement cautiously, listening, taking in deep breaths, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling that plagued her. Juniper kept casting compulsive glances over her shoulders and searching her peripheral vision where she had recently seen the ghost.

Except Juniper didn’t see or sense anything here this time. At the bottom of the stairs, there was a large wooden door to the wine cellar. It was closed, but it had a large window insert so Juniper could see inside the room.

From her position on the stairs, the coast was clear. Juniper had a perfect view of the wine racks.

And yet.

Juniper’s neck was tingling.

The stairs creaked below her even though Juniper stood still. Juniper turned to see if Jack was behind her but he wasn't.

When Juniper turned back around, a woman was reflected in the cellar door's glass.

The woman in the window appeared worried. She motioned for Juniper to come.

Startled, she reached for the rail to steady herself.

When Juniper looked back at the door, the ghostly woman was gone.

Since they'd bought this house, she'd been trying to explain away these visions: a trick of light, strange reflections in uneven glass. Surely not a woman out of time and place. Surely not.

And yet that was exactly what it was.

Juniper pushed through the door into the cellar and switched on the light just as she heard Jack coming down the stairs behind her. Juniper stopped and stared.

"Hey, next time wait for me."

Juniper couldn't answer. Her heart was in her throat. Someone was lying on the hardwood floor beside the wine rack. That someone was the very dead Sally Snaub.

Twenty Two

JACK spotted the body a second later. He stepped in front of Juniper, and said, "Go get Kaden."

Juniper was frozen in place. A hundred thoughts ping-ponged through her head, but none of them made any sense. Sally was dead. In her wine cellar. Not again.

"Junie!" Jack's tone was sharp enough to snap her out of her daze.

"I'm going." Juniper went back upstairs. Kaden sat with Jack's brother and his family. Jack's nieces were bugging Kaden to see his police badge. Kaden looked up when he heard her come in.

"Kaden?" Juniper sounded calmer than she felt. "We need you in the cellar."

Kaden studied her face. "Is something wrong?"

"You could say that."

He seemed to know Juniper didn't want to say anything in front of the kids. "Something to do with your latest issues?"

"Yep."

Kaden slipped the girls off his lap, took them by the hand, and led them to the kitchen. He returned seconds later. "Want to tell me what's going on?" He fell into step beside her.

"Sally..." Her voice caught.

“Junie, we had this conversation already.”

“Not this one, we haven’t.” Juniper went back down the stairs and pointed to where Jack stood near the body. “It’s Sally.”

Kaden went into what could only be called cop mode. He ordered both Jack and her upstairs and told Jack to ask his brother to take the kids home. While Jack did as ordered, Juniper considered the instructions a mere suggestion. She hovered just outside the cellar door. Kaden pulled out his cell phone and called it in.

“White female, approximately twenty-five years of age. Blunt force trauma to the head.”

To hear it described that way made her stomach lurch. No one deserved to have that happen to them, not even Sally. He requested the medical examiner and also asked dispatch not to send it out over the radio. Juniper knew the reason for that was to keep the Mabels from listening in. Then he disconnected and made another call.

“Hey, Cody.” Cody Lumos was one of Bohemian Lake’s newer homicide detectives. He and Juniper had met in October when the mayor’s daughter was found murdered in the attic. They’d briefly flirted and even had lunch together once but nothing had come of it. “Dispatch will be calling you.” As Kaden explained what they’d found, he looked her way and spotted her. “I’ll fill you in on the rest when you get here.” He slipped the phone into his pocket and came toward her. “I thought I told you to go upstairs.”

“You did. But I need to know what’s going on.” Juniper voice was steady.

Kaden put a hand on her shoulder. “Like it or not, this is a crime scene.”

He walked her up the stairs. “Go. I promise I’ll keep you posted.”

Jack sat at the bar. Juniper crossed the room and took the stool beside him.

“Finn’s making coffee,” he said.

“Good.”

“You okay, sweetie?”

“Okay? There’s a dead body—the second one in a week. I am definitely not okay.”

Jack stared at her. “Are you mad at me?”

“No. It’s just someone is breaking in here and killing people. Your ex-girlfriend, for heaven’s sake. This is my Inn. My life. I don’t understand why this is happening...” Juniper’s voice broke. “If I’m not yelling, I’m going to fall apart.” She burst into tears.

Jack slid off his stool and folded her into his arms. It seemed like she cried for a long time, but it was probably only a few minutes. She was pulling herself back together when the front door opened and Detective Cody Lumos entered, followed by a crew from the medical examiner’s office. Juniper wiped her eyes with a napkin decorated with Christmas trees, and Jack went to greet them. Jack showed them to the basement while she remained at the bar.

Pike and Finn came in carrying a stack of take-out cups and a stainless steel pump pot that Juniper assumed was filled with coffee. They set everything out on the bar.

"I should have helped you with that," Juniper said.

"No way." Pike poured coffee into two paper cups and passed them to her and Jack just as he returned.

Juniper's hand shook when she took the cup from her.

Jack put his hand on her shoulder. "Junie, what else can I do, babe?"

"Nothing," Juniper said. He slid onto the stool beside her and they sat holding hands, sipping their coffee in silence. Juniper only wished she knew what was going on. How had Sally Snaub ended up murdered—and she was sure she was—in her Inn? "It doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't," Jack said.

Juniper didn't realize she'd spoken the words aloud.

"Want to talk about it?"

"It's just, after we talked last night, I was so sure Evan and Sally were the ones breaking in here, the ones who'd murdered Feliz, but obviously I was wrong."

Jack shifted to face her. "Maybe not."

"How do you figure that?" Juniper said.

"Maybe Evan did it. Maybe they were breaking in here and Evan turned on her."

"He did seem kind of angry when he overheard her tell me she was still seeing you."

Juniper didn't get a chance to say anything further. Jack's cousin and Cody Lumos came through the door. Kaden

talked to Jack and asked him a few questions while Juniper went to the parlor with Cody and gave him her statement. Juniper went over everything again and again—the vandalism, Feliz, the threats from Evan and Sally, the chat with Ron Baron and even Evan’s aggression toward Sally. By the time they finished, mostly everyone had cleared out except for a few forensic techs who were still doing their thing in the basement.

Kaden and Cody headed to the station while Juniper waited for the others to finish up. Kaden hadn’t said what time Sally was killed. Juniper was still bewildered how she’d slipped by them unless she’d been down there all day.

Juniper was too exhausted to think about it anymore. She didn’t even bother washing her face before she collapsed into bed with Jack.

Twenty Three

YELLOW crime-scene tape was not a good look for the Inn. And it definitely wouldn't be good for business. Juniper wasn't looking forward to it, but she needed to get in there today, tape or no tape. Unfortunately she was banned until they finished up.

Since it was Boxing Day, the neighborhood was understandably quiet. Most of the businesses were either closed or would have limited hours today, which was ill-timed because Juniper could have really used a coffee right about now.

Although the murder had been kept quiet so far, it was just a matter of time before everyone found out.

Thankfully Pike answered her phone and invited her over. "I can't believe it happened again!"

"I can't, either." Juniper replied.

"What in the world was Sally doing there?"

"That's the question of the day."

"To think she was lying down there bleeding while we were upstairs drinking and eating in the taproom." Pike shuddered. "It's creepy."

Juniper couldn't disagree with that. "I don't understand how she got in without any of us noticing—unless she came in earlier in the day while I was out, but then she would have had to get past the alarm."

“Are you sure you set it?”

“I don’t remember. I thought I did but I was doing a lot of running around. In any case, I need to have the alarm company come out again. If I did activate it, either I’m doing something wrong or it’s not working right.”

“Or someone is bypassing the alarm.”

“Wouldn’t there be some evidence of that?” Juniper asked.

“Not if it’s done right.” Pike replied.

“And you know this how?”

Pike shrugged. “Eve.”

Juniper hadn’t considered the possibility of someone bypassing the system. It was a question she’d have to ask the alarm company. “Who would know how to do something like that?” Juniper said.

“Certainly not Sally,” Pike said. “We’ll figure it out, though. I suggest we get together later and brainstorm.”

The last brainstorming session at their book club meeting hadn’t accomplished anything. Juniper wasn’t sure a repeat would be any better. “I don’t know when I can fit it in. I have a lot to do today.”

“It’s Boxing Day. I’m not taking no for an answer.” She raised a hand when Juniper objected. “I’ve already discussed it with Mallory and Eve. We’ll do whatever it takes to figure this thing out.”

Eve, too? Juniper tried to blink away the tears in her eyes but Pike saw them. She crushed her to her green-and-white striped chest.

“Don’t you worry, Junie,” she said, patting her back. “It’s going to be all right.”

“What do you mean I can’t go into my own Inn yet?” Juniper said to Cody Lumos later that morning. “I have to get ready to open.”

“It’s only for another hour. Surely you can wait that long.”

“I don’t understand why.”

Cody rubbed his jaw, a gesture she’d seen him do a thousand times. Mostly when faced with Eve Banter. Juniper had called Kaden earlier and left a voice mail asking if she could take the tape down. Instead of calling back, he’d sent Cody. “We want to take one more look to make sure we didn’t miss anything. We’ll be out of your hair as soon as we can,” he said.

Another hour wouldn’t make or break her, but she was tired and cranky. She wanted to take control of at least one thing—even something as minor as cleaning up the crime scene. “I really need to get in there.”

“One hour.”

“Fine,” Juniper said, and stalked back to the apartment where Jack gloated that he’d been right. Somewhat reluctantly, she curled up on the couch with him, ate chocolate and watched a Christmas movie. She hated to admit it but it was just what she needed.

Kaden was just leaving the Inn when she arrived two hours later.

"There you are," he said. "I was wondering where you got to. Cody told me you were a little annoyed with him."

"He wouldn't let me into the Inn." It seemed petty now. "But that's okay," Juniper added quickly. "Is he still here? I should probably apologize."

"He left a few minutes ago. They're all finished up. I wanted to make sure they didn't miss anything, especially since... " He didn't finish the sentence.

"Since what?"

"Let's have a seat." He took her by the elbow and they sat at the nearest table. "First, I owe you an apology," he said.

"For what?"

"For not taking you seriously when you were convinced Feliz Merlot's death wasn't an accident." Kaden leaned back in his chair. "I spent most of the morning with the medical examiner. To make a long story short, he now thinks it's possible the weapon that killed Sally was also used on Feliz."

Juniper wasn't surprised but she bit her tongue.

"What was the weapon?"

"We're not sure at this point. Possibly something metal, like a crowbar, a bat, a pipe, or even a tool of some kind."

"What kind of tool? A hammer?"

He shook his head. "No. That would . . . well . . . it wasn't a hammer."

Juniper told Kaden about Evan's hammer and what Evan had overheard Sally say.

"That would explain why Sally was here. He could get back at all of you with one simple move." Kaden stood. "I'd better have Cody go talk with him."

"Why not you?"

"Cody's primary. With my connection to all of you, it wouldn't be good for me to stay on."

"Oh." She should have known that. Since he was Jack's family, the powers that be wouldn't want him leading the investigation. "Oh, one more thing. You said it could be a bat right?"

Kaden nodded.

"This is a total long shot, and I don't really believe it but Louise keeps a bat and threatens the teenagers with it. She did have a fight with Feliz before someone killed him and I don't believe she was a fan of Sally either. Pike told me Sally dated Rudolph for a bit before Louise hooked up with him."

Kaden promised to look into it and then he headed out.

Twenty Four

It was a gorgeous morning, and when Juniper turned the corner onto Main Street, she spotted some new red posters stapled to telephone poles advertising the protest tomorrow night. It wasn't enough to completely ruin Juniper's good mood of the morning, but it did tamp it down a bit.

Juniper waved to Pike, who was at the counter in the cafe as she passed. The shop looked busy. Even Rudolph was an early bird this morning. Juniper could see him unloading merchandise from boxes inside the gift store.

After Juniper deactivated the alarm, the first thing she did was check the motion detectors to make sure they were in the same position. Juniper was relieved to see that they were. Maybe Sally's death—whether intentional or not—had been enough to make the killer think twice about coming back. Probably not, but she could hope.

Juniper left her purse and keys on her desk and headed to the attic to finish unpacking. She was hanging some art when she ran out of picture hangers. As she dropped down onto a stool, she thought more about what Pike had said—that maybe the alarm had been tampered with. Someone from the alarm company was coming the next day at four to check the system and go over a few things with her. It was the only explanation that made sense.

The phone ringing interrupted her thoughts. It was Pike asking—actually more like demanding—that Juniper meet up with her, Mallory, and Eve at Cookies & Corsets in an hour. That didn't give her much time to get a few things done.

She glanced at the clock on the wall; maybe she'd pay Ron a visit and kill two birds with one stone.

She took a deep breath before she entered the hardware store. There were no customers at the moment and Ron Baron looked up expectantly when the bells on the door jingled—until he saw her, that is.

"You have a lot of nerve showing yourself here after what happened to Sally." He reached for the phone on the counter. "I'm calling the police."

"Go ahead. I'll be happy to wait." Juniper pulled her cell phone out of the front pocket of her pants. "I'll even call them for you."

That must not have been the response he expected because he put the receiver back down. "Don't bother. Just tell me what you want, then get the hell out."

Juniper leaned against the counter. "Your friends with Evan and Sally and I want to know what Sally was doing in my wine cellar last night."

"What kind of drugs are you on, girl? You told her to come. To meet you at the Inn at seven o'clock."

A chill went through her. "I did not."

"That's what Sally told me. She said you sent her a note."

Juniper's voice shook. "Mr. Baron, I never sent Sally any kind of note."

Ron stared at her. "You're delusional. I've had enough of this conversation. As far as I'm concerned, Sally was murdered, and we both know who did it." He pointed at her. "You did. And you can bet I'm going to let the police know all about you."

"Mr. Baron . . ."

"Get out of my store."

Juniper turned and left. She should have realized Ron Baron would react badly to Sally's death. They were friends, after all. While Juniper didn't expect him to welcome her with open arms, she never thought he'd accuse her of murder. He couldn't possibly think that she'd killed Sally. The idea was totally ridiculous. The more Juniper thought about it, the angrier she became and the faster she walked.

"Miss! Wait a minute."

Juniper stopped and turned around. It was one of the clerks who worked in the hardware store. He jogged down the alley until he reached her.

"Thanks for waiting." He paused to catch his breath. "Sorry. I'm not used to running like that."

"That's okay," Juniper said, at the same time wondering why he'd run after her. Maybe Mr. Baron sent him.

"I was in the storeroom and I overheard your conversation with Ron," he said. "Don't take what he said literally. He's just upset. When Sally came to see him, she was really bent out of shape. Evan had broken things off

with her. She kept ranting that it was your fault. That you'd ruined both of her relationships and she was leaving town for good."

"Really," Juniper said.

"He and Sally had an argument about it. Ron encouraged her to meet with you instead of running away. He said it was time to settle your differences. He even told Sally he'd go with her for support."

"Did Mr. Baron go with her?"

"I don't know," he said. "I was done working at five and went home. I just thought you'd want to know the whole story."

"I appreciate it."

He nodded. "Ron's a good guy. I'm sure he didn't mean what he said to you."

Juniper thanked him for the information and they went their separate ways. So Ron Baron had talked Sally into meeting with Juniper. If Ron accompanied Sally to the Inn, that meant only one thing: Ron Baron had killed her and he was trying to shift the blame to her to hide his own guilt.

Twenty Five

EVE rapped her little toy soldier on the table. “I call this meeting of Junie’s Merry Militia to order.”

Juniper almost choked on her cappuccino. “Junie’s Merry Militia?”

“I told her it was a bit much,” Mallory said.

“We need a name. Every good vigilante group has a name.” Eve held her nose in the air. “I happen to like it.”

“It’s stupid,” Dani said.

“You’re stupid,” Eve retorted

“Oh, who’s the little girl, now?”

Penelope waved her hand in the air before another argument broke out. “We are not a vigilante group or a militia. There will be no weapons... do you hear me, Eve?”

Eve huffed. “Roger, dodger.”

“Now let’s get on with this.” Penny pulled a notebook and a pen from her bag. “So, what do we know so far?” She didn’t wait for answers. “One—someone doesn’t want Juniper to open her taproom.” She scrawled this down on the pad. “Two—two people have been killed. Three—”

“This is a waste of time.” Eve snatched the pad and pen from Penny. “We know all this crap. What we need is a strategy. Cowboys don’t make lists. They saddle up and go in guns blazing.”

“And what exactly do you propose, John Wayne?” Pike asked. “If you’re planning a gun fight, I’ve got news for you —”

“Let her have her say,” Mallory said. “She does have a point. We could use a plan of attack.”

Pike leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms over her chest. “Well. Looks like I’m out gunned.”

“Okay,” Eve said. “I won’t rehash what we know. I’m no Detective Lumos, but it’s pretty obvious that the same person killed Feliz and Sally. What we need to know is what or who they have in common with the Inn?” She pulled out a diagram of the street and all the businesses.

“Where did you get that?” Penny asked.

“I stole it from the mayor’s office.”

Penny closed her eyes and shook her head.

“What? It’s public record.”

“That doesn’t mean you get a five-finger discount,” Penny clarified.

Eve pointed to the Gothic Haunt with the pen. “I’ve been thinking a lot about this. What’s so important about the Inn and who wants to keep it from opening?”

“That lady who plastered the red posters all over the place,” Mallory said.

Eve nodded. “Yes, good. I saw those posters. I propose we all go to that meeting.”

“We were already planning to go.” Pike said.

“Well, help me out. This is a team effort, don’t you know?” Eve said. “Give me your input.”

Mallory chimed in. "Maybe the killer wants the building for some other reason."

"Maybe someone wants to open their own Inn," Pike said.

The three of them went back and forth with ideas. Juniper tried to interrupt several times to tell them what she knew.

Pike finally noticed Juniper. "Something wrong, Junie?"

"I appreciate everyone's help," Juniper said. "But none of the ideas take Sally into account."

"The girl's right." Eve patted her hand. "Don't take this the wrong way, but Feliz Merlot's death at least makes sense. It was a way to get to you."

Juniper smiled at Eve. "No offense taken. And you were right that the two murders are related." Juniper relayed what the medical examiner had told Kaden, then filled them in on her conversation with Ron Baron and what the store clerk had said. "If Feliz and Sally were killed with some kind of tool," Penny said, "and Ron went with Sally last night, that gave him both means and opportunity."

"That's true," Juniper said. "But I can't figure out what his motive would be. I can't think of any reason why Ron would want to stop the Inn from opening. Or why he'd kill someone who was supposedly his friend."

"Umm, hello," Dani chimed in. "He lives next door. Has it not occurred to anyone that the dude might not want a bar next door?"

“The youngster’s got a point. And maybe Sally’s murder wasn’t planned,” Eve said. “What if Ron accompanied her to set her up, but Sally figured out what he was doing? Then she’d have to be eliminated, or she’d blow the whistle.”

“You may be onto something,” Juniper said. “But let’s look at everyone. Who else would want to keep the Inn and Taproom from opening?”

“The red-poster lady,” Eve said. “Now that we got a couple of suspects, what’s our plan?”

Penny lifted the pen from Eve’s hand. “I know exactly what we’re going to do.”

Ten minutes later they had a plan. Or rather, Penny did. Juniper didn’t especially like it—except for going to the Bohemian Lake Historical Society meeting—but at this point, she was too tired to argue. The six of them planned to take shifts when they could to keep an eye on the Inn. Pike and Mallory were going to watch in the early evening from inside the café. Penny and Dani were going to take the late evening and planned on sitting in Penny’s car in the cemetery parking lot, where she could see the back door. Juniper’s job was to canvass the neighborhood like she’d been doing. And Eve? Well, starting tomorrow, it seemed Juniper now had a security guard.

Instead of going straight back to the Gothic Haunt, Juniper the deli up the street to pick up some sandwiches. It was almost three, and she hadn’t eaten lunch. This time of day, the deli wasn’t crowded. Rudolph Windsor sat at one of

the tables with a man Juniper didn't recognize. They were engaged in what appeared to be an intense conversation. Juniper figured she'd wait to say hello.

Rocco Deer was at the counter. "I heard the news, Junie. I couldn't believe it happened again. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so, but thanks for asking." Juniper ordered two turkey sandwiches with the works. She was just about to leave when Rudolph's companion suddenly got loud.

Juniper looked at Rocco, who shrugged. He didn't know what it was all about, either.

Juniper watched as Gary, the alarm guy, opened the panel and checked everything there was to check. "I don't see any problems here," he said. "Let's take a look at your keypad." He had her set and deactivate the alarm several times. It worked just fine.

"I don't get it," Juniper said. "Could someone have tampered with it?"

Gary shook his head. "If anyone messed with it, it would set off a tamper alarm. You have motion detectors, don't you?"

Juniper nodded. "They were set off the other day."

He crossed the taproom to the motion detector that faced the door and pointed to it. "There's your problem. It's turned up. Not gonna get any motion there unless you're dancing on the ceiling." He checked the others. All three

had been pivoted on their mounting brackets to face upward.

Juniper's anger hadn't dissipated much by the time Gary left. He'd repositioned the motion detectors and advised her that she might want to add a surveillance system. When he told her the cost, she thought about advising him on where he could shove his surveillance system.

Jack listened to her ranting without complaint. They sat at the bar and cracked a bottle of wine. "So moving the motion detectors explains why the alarm hasn't gone off," Juniper said, "but it doesn't explain why there's no sign of a break-in."

"No, it doesn't," he said. "Any ideas?"

"None. I'm totally stumped."

"The motion sensors were activated once, right?"

Juniper nodded.

"Maybe that's the night they were moved."

"That makes sense, depending on how long it took for the police to respond," Juniper said. "The alarm company called me first to make sure it wasn't a false alarm. I think it took me about fifteen minutes to get here and the police only beat me by a minute or two."

"Then it was probably another couple of minutes before you entered. Definitely enough time to move them."

Juniper took a large swig of her wine.

"I think we should consider the surveillance cameras. There's a good chance this person will just do the same

thing again.”

“I know what to look for now. Those cameras are way out of our budget.”

“Junie, we’re fine.”

“Absolutely not.”

“And why not?” Jack went behind the bar, and placed his glass in the sink.

“Because we’re not pulling profits from the renovation business. This Inn needs to be profitable on its own.”

He leaned across the bar. “It’s not like we can’t shift the funds back later.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

Juniper finished the last of her glass. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll see.”

Jack left ahead of her to pick up dinner. Juniper set the alarm and locked the door behind her. Rudolph Windsor had just exited the gift store as she came out, and she waved to him. He didn’t acknowledge her and kept walking toward the parking lot next door.

Seeing Rudolph reminded her of Louise, so instead of walking home, she turned in the other direction. Louise looked up when Juniper entered Let It Brie.

“How is everything over there today?”

Juniper gave her a rundown of her day. “So, we’re managing, and if someone tries to break in again, the motion detectors should work.”

“That’s good.” She glanced at her watch.

"Am I keeping you from a hot date?" Juniper asked.

She blushed. "Not really. I mean . . . it's just . . . I'm supposed to meet Rudolph."

"I just saw him leaving his store."

"Oh dear," Louise said, reaching for her keys. "I should hurry up. I don't want to keep him waiting."

They walked to the door together, and Louise locked up.

"So, where's Romeo taking you for dinner?" Juniper asked.

"Oh, we're not going to dinner." Louise blushed again. "We're keeping our relationship low key for now."

Juniper frowned. More like Rudolph was.

She didn't want to see Louise get hurt. Hopefully Rudolph wasn't just using her. *Oh well, it was not Juniper's place to meddle. That was more of a job for Eve.* Perhaps Rudolph would declare his love tonight, and they'd live happily ever after.

Right. And maybe someone would stop murdering people in her Inn.

Twenty Six

JUNIPER ignored the ringing of her telephone after dinner and stretched out against some pillows on the sofa with her laptop. She wasn't sure what it would accomplish, but she'd decided to Google every business on her block of Main Street while Jack watched the movie *Die Hard* next to her. She glanced at her phone to see who'd called. *Mom and Dad*.

They were supposed to be flying home New Year's Day to spend some time at the Inn. She debated whether or not to call them back and tell them about all that had happened. They'd probably catch the next flight and then she'd have to worry about them getting hurt as well.

Instead she typed in Bohemian Lake and pulled up the Facebook page. There was a link to the BLPD which led to a ton of reports of drug related incidents. Juniper was shocked to read about everything that was going on at the town's high school. One fourteen-year-old teenager had died and several others had suffered vomiting, seizures and comas after taking the colorful little pill known as "Molly". Juniper was shocked; she never would have guessed this was all going on. No wonder the police had been so eager to call Feliz Merlot's death an accident. They had their hands full.

She got to her feet and poured herself a glass of wine before returning to her seat. She decided to look up Guitars

and Cadillacs next. It seemed Evan Cross had been in quite a number of altercations in the past. Juniper guessed that came with owning a bar. There was also a rumor about him dealing drugs out of the bar. Interesting.

There wasn't much on Ron Baron, either, other than that he was on Facebook. The hardware store didn't have a website. Neither did Rocco Deer's deli. Peace and Light, and Let It Brie had websites but there was nothing suspect there.

Juniper found two articles about Rudolph Windsor's boutiques. The longer of the two, featured in the Bohemian paper before Penny Trubble and her father had taken it over, was mostly about his Chic Bohemian Antique Shop, which carried a wide selection of period collectables. The writer raved about the imported clocks and jewels and mostly neglected the other items. The article only briefly mentioned how one could get such expensive items for a fraction of what they cost elsewhere.

Juniper also found a couple of complaints about Rudolph from past employees on a review site. Apparently, he was not a well-liked boss. That didn't exactly make him a killer.

Two hours after Juniper started, she came to the conclusion that this was all a massive waste of time and called her parents back. They talked for quite a while about nothing in particular, but it was comforting nonetheless. By the time they hung up, she could hardly keep her eyes open.

Twenty Seven

THE moment Juniper entered the cafe, she glanced at the calendar in her phone and remembered the new bed was getting delivered. Finn sat at a table in the corner with Louise, Star, and Rocco having a coffee. Juniper chatted for a moment and then disappeared across the road to tend to the delivery. Just as the delivery truck pulled into the driveway, she saw Ron Baron approaching. What the heck was he up to now?

“Oh no, you don’t. Get off my property,” Juniper said.

“Hold on there, sweetheart.” Ron held up his hands.

“Excuse me. Don’t sweetheart me. You killed Sally in one of your attempts to sabotage me.” It wasn’t the smartest thing to say to the killer, but she’d had enough. “You’re not going to get away with it. There’s an investigation—”

“Whoa. I didn’t kill anyone and surely not Sally.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I came to apologize.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Detective Lumos came to see me.”

“And?”

“If Sally hadn’t listened to me, she’d still be alive. That’s something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life. You don’t know how much I regret not going with her. I should have closed the store early and come with her.”

“You were at the store when Sally came here?”

Ron nodded. "I was. I had to show Detective Lumos my surveillance tapes to prove it."

The anger she'd felt minutes ago settled like a ball of lead in her stomach. "You didn't kill Feliz and Sally."

"Sorry to disappoint you." The corners of his mouth turned up.

Now Juniper was the one who was puzzled.

"Detective Lumos questioned me and he vouched for your character and told me everything that's been happening here. I didn't believe him at first, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized perhaps Evan has gone off the rails. They've taken him for questioning."

Ron stuck out his right hand. "How about we call a truce and start over?"

Juniper shook his outstretched hand. "Agreed."

Louise came up the second flight of stairs and knocked just as Juniper finished leading the delivery guys upstairs. "I felt bad you were in here while we were all scarfing down donuts, so I brought you one. Hope you don't mind."

"Thanks."

Her gaze roamed the attic space. "This is the first time I've been in here. It's pretty impressive. I've never seen the street from this high up. It's really beautiful—all the snowy trees and holiday decorations. I can see why you'd want to live up here."

Her gaze settled on Rudolph's storefront. He was talking to a group of girls out front—at least Juniper

assumed they were female from the colorful scarves and mitts. They were, after all, a little ways away. When Louise turned away, Juniper asked her how her evening with Rudolph had gone last night.

She sighed. "All right, I guess."

"You don't sound like it was."

"I just wish he'd make up his mind about what he wants. One minute he's like the nicest guy in the world, and the next he ignores me. Frankly, I'm getting tired of it."

"Have you tried asking him what he wants?"

"Of course I have. He says he's just stressed out about work. He's been having trouble getting some of his inventory, but he told me he had that all under control and it wouldn't be a problem much longer." She frowned. "He sent me home early last night because he had a six A.M. flight to New York this morning. He said he had a meeting with some new suppliers."

"Maybe he changed his mind, or the meeting was cancelled," Juniper said, although Juniper didn't believe it herself. There was no doubt in her mind Rudolph was giving her the runaround.

"That must be it, but I wonder why he didn't call me."

Juniper hoped she didn't expect an answer.

Twenty Eight

J UNIPER rolled away from Jack's fingers as they tickled her ribs. She groaned and looked at the clock. It was after eight in the morning, and she had a lot to do. Thirty minutes later, she was showered and dressed in a comfortable red plaid shirt-dress over tights—festive, yet practical for unpacking boxes.

It was another beautiful snowy morning, and the Gothic Haunt looked gorgeous—all covered in ice and snow—as they pulled in the long drive. It was one those unbelievably cold days where even though the sun shone, the air hurt your face within seconds of exposure. She was thankful that she'd hopped in the truck with Jack. Not that her walk was ever long.

With a small pit of worry festering in her stomach, she unlocked the door and went inside. She went from room to room and checked everything twice. Much to her relief, everything was fine, so she headed across the street to celebrate with a peppy peppermint cappuccino.

Pike's barista was behind the counter working her magic as usual. The early-morning crowd had come and gone, but the next wave that usually included writers and students hadn't arrived yet. There was only one person in line ahead of her. Pike was in the corner singing to herself while she put mugs away.

“What’s she so happy about?”

The Barista grinned. “I think it’s because of your new chef. You know, the one who’s been cooking in Pike’s kitchen.”

Juniper watched as heat crept into Pike’s face as she overheard the conversation. “Absolutely not. There’s nothing going on there.” Pike exclaimed.

“Uh-huh. Sure there isn’t.” Juniper laughed.

“Seriously. We’re just friends,” she said, drying one of her mugs vigorously.

“Okay, chill. I think you’re going to rub the genie out of the bottle, there.”

Pike looked down and laughed at herself.

The barista scooped a large dollop of whipped cream on top of the cup and then turned to her boss. “That hug he gave you last night wasn’t a just friend’s hug. No, I think Santa delivered you a shiny new toy for Christmas and you like it.” She sprinkled pieces of candy cane on the whipped cream.

“And your feelings are written all over your face,” Juniper said.

The barista nodded. Just then the door chimed. “Well, speak of the toy. Vroom Vroom.”

Juniper glanced over her shoulder.

“Hey, Finn. We were just talking about you,” Juniper said.

Pike’s face turned bright red.

“Uh-oh,” Finn said. “That can’t be good.”

The barista grinned. "That kind of depends. Pike was just telling Junie you—"

"—were a great cook," Pike said. She shot her employee a look that told her to button her lips. Or else.

Finn looked from Pike to the barista and back to Pike again, like he was missing something. Thank goodness he was.

Pike grabbed the coffee from her barista and passed it over the counter to Juniper, then took Finn's order for a plain coffee with an extra shot of espresso. As Juniper left, she peeked over her shoulder at Pike and giggled.

Pike was going to wring her barista's neck.

Juniper unlocked the door to the Gothic Haunt and went inside. Before she had a chance to take off her coat, the door opened and Eve Banter came in.

"You're here early. I didn't think you were coming in until this afternoon." Juniper said.

"I figured you could use me," Eve said. "If I'd been here all those other times, things never would have happened." She removed her coat and revealed her 'Merry Militia' sweatshirt. "So, you go ahead and get to work and don't worry about a thing. I'm on it."

"On what?"

"It. I said don't worry."

"I appreciate your help, Eve, but I really don't need looking after."

"Maybe you don't, but this place sure does," she said. "Break-ins, murder, present thievery. Maybe you want to

take bets on what's gonna happen today."

Juniper heard Jack snicker from the back. He'd just finished carrying wine cases into the basement. They must have gotten a delivery from the local vineyard while Juniper was getting coffee.

"Nothing is going to happen," Juniper said.

"I think Eve has a point. It wouldn't hurt to have extra eyes on the place. It might deter the vandal. I know I'd run in the other direction," Jack said.

Juniper frowned and then turned back to Eve. "Look, Jack's here for a bit and there will be people going in and out all day. I have movers coming in to help me settle in upstairs. And Finn will be here, too, training new staff. It's perfectly safe."

"Yeah? That's what we all thought back in the summer before bodies started turning up and drugs started circulating in the high school. No such thing as a safe place around Bohemian Lake anymore. Before we know it, the toddlers'll be brewing hooch."

"What? And steal your job?" Jack teased.

Eve narrowed her eyes. "Button it, Jackie boy. Nope. It's time to take this town back and I'm ready to lead the charge."

"Fair enough," Juniper said to Eve. "Jack, why don't you get Eve acquainted with the layout of the Inn. Then you can talk to her about any security concerns."

"Me?"

It was Juniper's turn to suppress a smile. "You did say you thought it was a good idea, didn't you?"

Juniper downed the rest of her cappuccino, slung her purse over her shoulder and snuck away while Jack and Eve were busy. She didn't feel a bit bad about leaving Eve with Jack. He deserved it. With any luck, Eve would drive him up the wall within the first hour and he'd learn a valuable lesson: Never side with anyone against Juniper.

There were three places on the street she hadn't visited yet, all belonging to Rudolph Windsor. So far, she'd mostly struck out trying to find anyone who had seen suspicious activity near the mansion. Star had been the only one who'd seen anything even remotely out of the ordinary. Since Rudolph's stores were across the street, she was hopeful that at least one of his staff had seen something. And, frankly, she was curious about the situation between Louise and Rudolph. Louise was a lovely person—dented baseball bat and cheese argument aside—and Juniper was annoyed with Rudolph for treating her the way he was. Not that she could do anything about it, except maybe put in a good word for Louise.

Juniper remembered the article she'd read in the Bohemian Newspaper about Rudolph's boutique, so she decided to start there. Many of the boutique shops in the area were funky, fun places like Pike and Lulu's. But Rudolph's store was a little more posh with its white fur rugs, Victorian wall sconces and crystal chandeliers. The lone sales clerk was arranging vintage 1950s crystal tree

ornaments inside a vintage glass-topped coffee table. She looked up as Juniper entered and greeted her with a smile.

"You're Jack's girl, aren't you?" she asked.

Juniper nodded.

"I saw the emergency vehicles over there the other day," she said, shaking her head. "I'm so sorry for all of your troubles."

"I appreciate that."

"What can I do for you? I have the feeling you're not here to shop."

"No, I think I've purchased enough from this place. I just bought your antique bed the other day. You should have seen us getting it up to the third floor. Thank goodness part of the floor is removable."

"Your floor is removable?"

"Just around the attic stairs, yes." Juniper picked up a Tiffany style lamp and ran her finger over the price tag, "Seriously, these prices are amazing. I don't know where he gets this stuff from. I've been shopping antiques my whole life and I've never seen deals like this."

"Yes, he's pretty secretive about his suppliers, so I'm afraid I have no idea either. Eve and Penny have been in here a few times asking questions. I think they believe the deals are a little too good, if you know what I mean."

Juniper smirked. "Penny's got a nose for stories, alright. Mr. Windsor best be legit." They both laughed. "Anyway, I'm just wondering if you've noticed anything

strange happening over by my place. You have a perfect view.”

“I can’t say that I have,” The clerk said. “But Mr. Windsor would be the better person to ask. He keeps an eagle eye on everything—cameras out the wazoo.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “He’s very diligent.”

It was the same over at the gift store. The clerk hadn’t seen anyone. While Juniper was there, she’d spied a cute sweater and on impulse decided to buy it. It was a well-known brand and marked half off. Juniper couldn’t pass it up. While the clerk rang up the purchase, she asked Juniper what she planned to do after the Inn closed.

“I’m usually exhausted by that time of night, so I go home and crash.”

She giggled. “No, I mean after it’s closed for good. You know, after you sell it.”

Juniper almost dropped her credit card as she passed it across the counter. “Hopefully, that won’t happen for a long time. Possibly never. I’d like to hand it down to the kids I don’t have yet.” An image of a little boy who looked just like Jack flashed in her mind. Get a grip, Palmer.

The clerk frowned. “Huh. I heard you were putting it up for sale. I figured it was because of everything that happened. And with those red posters everywhere . . .”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. “Those posters belong in the trash.” Juniper slid her card back into her wallet. “Who told you I was selling the Gothic Haunt? I’d like to set them straight.”

“I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I’m glad you did. Was it Hatti who told you?”

The clerk shook her head. “That’s the lady with those posters, right?” She handed Juniper the white shopping bag holding her new sweater. “Actually, it was Mr. Windsor.”

Louise had said something similar last week. It made sense now—it had come from Rudolph. But why did he think that?

“Thanks.”

Juniper paused out on the sidewalk and decided to confront the man, maybe she would find him at his third business.

Rudolph stood behind the counter of his pharmacy. The counter was piled with boxes of all shapes and sizes, and he was attaching price tags to the different items inside. “Good morning, to what do I owe the pleasure?” he said. “It’s been a long time since you’ve been in here.”

Juniper wasn’t sure if it was good or bad that he seemed to be in a friendly mood. “I’ve been a little busy,” Juniper said.

“You certainly have.” He slid a pile of boxes aside and leaned on the counter. “I just got in this new collection of canvas prints for the gift shop if you’re interested.” He held up one of the paintings. “They’re all thirty percent less than you’ll find them anywhere else.”

Any other time Juniper might have been tempted. “Not today.”

"I understand perfectly," he said. "I'm sure your money is tight right now, especially in light of everything that's happened over there." He shook his head. "So horrible."

"My finances are fine. Everything is coming together and we'll be opening right on schedule."

His smile disappeared and reappeared so quickly, she would have missed it if she hadn't been watching him so closely. "Well, that's certainly good news," he said.

"If that's the case, why are you telling everyone I'm selling the place?"

"Where in the world did you hear such a thing?" Rudolph was no longer smiling.

Juniper wasn't about to give away her sources and cause problems for them. "It came from more than one person."

He busied himself with the paintings in front of him. "I never . . . They must have misunderstood me."

"I don't think so. When I mentioned to them that I had no intention of leaving, they seemed genuinely surprised."

"Is it any wonder?" he said. "Death and destruction have followed you around ever since you bought that old house."

"It sounds like you're blaming me. I can't help that someone is out to get me."

He smiled again. "Oh, dear. That sounds a bit paranoid." He pushed the paintings to the side. "Remember

when I mentioned a week or so ago there was something I wanted to talk to you about?"

Juniper vaguely remembered him saying something like that when she'd run into him on the sidewalk outside the cafe.

Rudolph came around the counter. "I know you've had a bad time of it. A terrible time, in all honesty. I may have pointed out to a few people my surprise that you hadn't quit."

It wasn't quite an admission, but she'd take it.

"I have a proposal for you," he said. "I want to buy your mansion."

Juniper couldn't have heard him right. "Excuse me?"

"I'd like to buy the Doctor's House."

"You mean the Gothic Haunt? Why would you want to do that?"

"I've had my eye on that property for quite a while. It would be the perfect place to house and sell my antiques. As you can see, I'm outgrowing my current locations and with the new toll highway going in just forty minutes away, this town will continue to expand, so I need to expand as well."

"Why didn't you make an offer when it was for sale if you wanted it?"

He shrugged. "It's my defect in life. I'm always hunting for a deal. I was waiting for the price to come down. It seems like I waited a little too long."

"Is that why you've been telling people I'm closing down?"

"I swear I never actually said you were leaving." He gave her his biggest salesman smile. "So how about my proposal?"

Juniper shook her head. "I'm sorry, Rudolph, but the Inn isn't for sale. Not now and not ever. I've put too much time, money, and sweat into that place to give it all up."

The bell on the door chimed as a customer came in.

"You know where to find me when you change your mind."

"Find out anything interesting?" Jack asked when Juniper returned to the Gothic Haunt. He sat by himself on a stool at the bar.

"Whatever do you mean, sweetheart?" Juniper held up the bag holding her sweater. "I was shopping."

"Right. No one's buying it, Palmer. Spill it. Nice move, by the way. Pawning Eve off on me, I'll have to remember that." He grinned. "Of course, if that's lingerie in the bag I'll forgive you."

Juniper put the bag down on the bar. "Where is Eve?"

"She went to the café to meet Mr. Trubble for lunch. She said she had—and I quote—'a hankering for something sweet.'"

"I wonder if she meant the food or the man?"

"The man. That woman's all libido."

Juniper let out a sigh. "Well, whatever keeps her busy."

"I saw you leaving the gift shop. Did you learn anything?"

“Oh, gee. You mean like the fact that our neighbor from across the road wants to buy the Inn from us and that’s why he keeps telling people were not opening?”

“Say what now?”

Juniper filled him in on the Rudolph situation, then she picked up her bag. “I’ll be upstairs unpacking if you need me.”

Jack touched the shopping bag. “Are you going to share what you bought?” He had a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Juniper yanked the bag out of his reach. “Behave and maybe you’ll find out tonight.” Juniper spun around thinking maybe she’d have to dig out some pajamas that weren’t flannel. Ugh.

Twenty Nine

“WHAT in the jingle bells are you wearing?” Penny asked Eve when they’d all arrived at the agreed-upon meeting place outside the town hall.

“What? It’s like forty below out here. I thought snow pants and ear muffs were the practical choice.”

“Well yes, snow pants are fine, but wherever did you find them in a leopard print?”

“Oh no, forget it. I’m not telling you. Next thing I know everyone in Bohemian Lake will be looking as on point as me.”

Juniper, Mallory, Dani and Pike burst out laughing.

“What are you all laughing about? I bought you each a pair for Christmas. It’s part of our Merry Militia uniform.”

“Oh good lord, let’s go before she makes us wear them,” Penny said, pulling open the heavy front door.

When Pike, Eve, and Juniper reached the main meeting room, they weren’t sure they were in the right place. There were only five people in a room that could have held thirty, and they were all crammed into the front row.

A man turned around, his eyes widening when he saw them. He quickly whispered to the woman beside him, who did the same to the woman next to her. It made Juniper think of a kids’ game of telephone.

“How rude,” Eve said, loud enough for the front-rowers to hear. “Perhaps I should zap some manners into them.” The staring man faced front again.

Penny leaned forward and whispered to Eve, “What are you getting your snow pants in a twist about, that they didn’t include you? And what do you mean zap some manners into them?”

“I brought along my new toy,” Eve said, sighing as she searched through her massive purse. “I call him zippy. I’ve also got pepper spray, a switchblade, and some nunchucks.”

Juniper leaned forward to look at the arsenal in Eve’s purse, not sure whether to be impressed or frightened. “Is all that hardware necessary for a historical society meeting?”

Eve narrowed her eyes. “Clearly you’ve never been to a cult meeting before.”

Pike shushed them. “Let’s just stay focused,” she said, giving Juniper’s hand a squeeze. “We have a right to be here. It’s your neighborhood, too, and your business.”

Someone up front let out a harrumph and then one of the women said, “Well, I never!”

“I’ll bet you haven’t,” Eve said.

Pike poked her with her elbow. “Stop antagonizing these people.”

“You’re no fun at all. I’m gonna start calling you Penny number two.”

Juniper turned around as the door closed behind them. A tiny woman with dove-gray beehive hair and wire-rimmed glasses marched to the front of the room. She wore a blue

velvet blazer and mid-calf tweed skirt that did her no favors in combination with the clunky green snow boots. Next to her, Eve looked downright fashionable in her leopard-print snow pants.

The woman stepped onto a small stool at the podium. She took a piece of paper from her skirt pocket, unfolded it, and spread it out in front of her. "Welcome to this very important meeting of the Bohemian Lake Historical Society. Thank you all for coming. There is a blight on this community and we must put a stop to it."

"Blight my patootie," Eve whispered.

Pike jabbed her with her elbow again.

"Every day we are losing more of our heritage. As the saying goes, those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. We cannot stand by and be idle."

The front-rowers nodded in unison like bobble heads.

"I need the support of each and every one of you. Call Mayor Patone. Write letters to the editor. If we have to, we'll march up and down Main Street with signs."

Eve leaned forward, "What do you want to bet Hatti was part of that damn temperance movement as well."

Mallory leaned across Pike, and whispered, "I can picture that."

Hatti folded the paper and put it back in her pocket. "Does anyone have any questions?"

Eve's hand shot up.

Oh no.

Hatti pointed at Eve. "You in the back row."

Pike pushed Eve back down and stood. "How does restoring an old, abandoned historic home and returning it to its former glory destroy history?"

Hatti pursed her lips. "The restoration isn't the problem. Turning it into a bar, on the other hand, is."

Two people in the front row whispered to each other.

"It's not being turned into a bar. It's being turned into a charming Inn. There's no better way for people to get a glimpse of history than to actually dine and stay inside the mansion. That is the reason you wanted to turn it into a museum, correct?" Pike continued. "So people could experience the history of the house for themselves?"

Juniper sat up straighter. She couldn't have said it better herself.

Hatti pursed her lips. "That's not the point."

One of the whisperers in the front row said, "I think Miss Hart made a good point."

Hatti's gaze shifted and then went back and forth across their row, taking in Pike before finally resting on Juniper. "You!" She hopped down from her step stool.

Pike looked ready for a fight. Juniper stood and touched her arm.

She took her seat again.

"I am not ruining anyone's heritage. I bought an old dilapidated house and restored it. Would you rather have it remain empty and abandoned?"

The front-rowers whispered among themselves.

"If your group really wants to save Bohemian Lake's history, you should be in favor of what I'm doing."

"Get out." Hatti pointed to the door. "You're not welcome here."

"Ms. Dustfeather," Juniper said. "This is a public meeting and I do not have to leave, especially when it directly concerns me."

She marched to the door. "Meeting adjourned."

Eve stood after the place had cleared, "Well now, that hardly could have gone better. What a shame. I was hoping to try out my new Taser."

They stopped for a coffee at Pike's on the way home and then went their separate ways. On the way out of the cafe, Juniper remembered her new sweater across the road. She could wait until tomorrow to get it, but since she was hoping to wear it, she'd make a quick stop at the Inn. It would be a good distraction. She couldn't stop thinking, as she crossed Main Street, how Hatti had acted when she discovered that Juniper was present at her meeting. The funny thing was, Juniper had really liked Hatti before all this.

Hatti was like a different person lately. Sure, she'd been nervous and meek when she'd helped Juniper with the mansion's history in October. Juniper had practically had to pull teeth to get her to talk but looking back, she'd probably been afraid of Helen at the time, so what was with the attitude now. She'd never protested Juniper fixing up the Doctor's House.

Oh well, at least the meeting had been sparsely attended. If the people in that front row were her only supporters, Juniper didn't have anything to worry about, but then again maybe that's what was fueling the vandalism. A desperate move to stop the Inn from opening because she didn't have the support required to do it legally. *Nah*. Juniper dismissed the idea. Hatti was, after all, just a little old lady.

Juniper walked up the front steps and unlocked the door. Once inside, she disarmed the security system, then flicked on one of the wall sconces. She pictured the room full of guests and smiled to herself. It would be lived in, loved and shared with others. A place where people could admire the past while creating memories for the future.

After she'd retrieved her purchase from the third floor, she crossed the taproom to leave and spotted something on top of the bar. Funny. Juniper hadn't seen anything there when she'd first come in, but the lights had been dim. She went closer. It was a brown paper bag. How curious. Had Finn forgotten his lunch? Juniper lifted it and peeked inside, and then immediately gagged, and dropped it.

Feces.

Thirty

“RELAX, it’s only dog poop.” Pike said, as she walked Juniper back across the street to the Inn.

Juniper had called 911 as soon as she got to Pike’s café. The dispatcher had practically laughed her off the phone when she’d explained what she found. Clearly dog poop was not an emergency—never the less she sent a car right away.

“The thing is, the bag wasn’t on the bar when I arrived, which means whoever left it could have come in while I was upstairs grabbing my bag.”

Pike nodded and squeezed Juniper’s hand.

It wasn’t lost on either of them that Juniper could have ended up like Feliz and Sally. That someone could get so close and she didn’t even know was terrifying.

While Juniper and Pike waited for the police to arrive, she scanned the street in search of whoever might have done this. The sidewalks were busy. Most businesses were closed, but Rudolph’s stores were open, as well as the deli and the crystal shop. Juniper didn’t see anyone who looked like they’d just dropped a deuce on her bar.

It was the same officer who’d responded the night the alarm had gone off, so he knew a little about what had been going on. When he told her to wait outside, she was perfectly happy to let him check the building alone.

It wasn't long before he came out carrying the paper bag. "It's all clear. Also, I just found this." He reached into the bag and pulled a folded slip of red paper out.

Juniper jumped back. Gross.

"It's all right," he said. "It was a prop."

Juniper swallowed. "I didn't get close enough to find out."

He grimaced. "Someone's idea of a practical joke, I guess." He opened the folded sheet of paper. His smile disappeared as he held out the paper. "This may not be just a joke."

"What do you mean?"

Juniper expected him to pass it to her, but instead he held it up so she could read it. A chill went down her spine. It definitely wasn't a joke. The note read: get out of my house or next time it will be you on the cellar floor. It was written on paper torn from one of Hatti's posters

Thirty One

It took a while before Juniper stopped shaking. The dog poop had been bad enough, but that note had really gotten to her. The fact that the killer had been that close really scared her, but why had the killer let her go. As frightened as she was, she was curious. Feliz and Sally had not been warned.

Unless Juniper was the target and the point was fright. Someone wanted her scared enough to give up the Gothic Haunt. It couldn't be a coincidence that this happened right after the town meeting and that the message had been sent on the poster. Hatti was older and small, but that didn't mean she couldn't have killed two people, especially if she had an accomplice.

Was Hatti tied to any of the other suspects? Ron, Evan, or even Louise?

Juniper pulled her phone out of her purse and Googled Hatti's name to get her address. Much to her surprise, a five-year-old-article popped up about a local event sponsored years ago by Hatti's family. The article thanked the Dustfeathers as well as Helen Patone and Lulu McCloskey.

Juniper pulled out her phone and punched in Eve's number.

"Hello." The sound of an engine roared so loudly in the background that Juniper could hardly hear.

“Eve, it’s Juniper. I have a question for you. Is Hatti related to Helen and Lulu?”

“Lulu’s on a cruise.” Eve shouted.

“I know that. I asked if she’s related to Hatti. Where are you? It sounds like a smash up derby.”

“It is—for snowmobiles.”

“Oh my goodness, Eve. That sounds dangerous. Please tell me you’re not entering.”

“Oh no, of course not. It wouldn’t be safe. I forgot my glasses at home. I wouldn’t want to get disqualified again for running over someone’s foot. Big babies.” She mumbled.

Juniper tilted her head back and took a deep breath in through her nose. How had this woman survived for sixty years? The roaring died down and Juniper assumed Eve must have walked away from the derby pit.

“Now what were you asking—something about Hatti being related to Helen and Lulu?”

“Yes. I’m trying to find a connection.”

“Well, you found one. Hatti’s grandfather and Lulu and Helen’s grandmother were related. So, I guess that makes the girls cousins.”

Juniper thanked Eve and disconnected the call. She had just found Hatti’s motive and now Hatti was going to have a surprise visitor of her own.

Hatti’s house was only a couple of blocks away from the center of town, with a large country porch. Juniper climbed the steps and rang the doorbell. For a split second

she wondered what she was going to say. She waited and rang a second time.

“Sweet baby Jesus, I’m coming.” Seconds later she swung the door open. “You!” Hatti was already dressed for bed, and she pulled the neck of her white frilly chenille robe closer together, then yanked on the belt to make it tighter.

“I apologize for the unannounced visit, but we need to talk,” Juniper said.

“I don’t think so. You have a lot of nerve invading my space like this.”

“Invading? Like how you invaded mine?”

“Pardon me? I have no idea what you’re going on about but I’m calling the police if you don’t get off my property now.”

Juniper crossed her arms over her chest. “Why don’t you do that? Maybe you can explain to them why you left dog poop on my bar.”

Hatti had the door half closed, but she stopped. “What?”

“You heard me.” Juniper enunciated each word slowly.

The little bit of color in her face drained away. “I did no such thing!”

“It’s too much of a coincidence that it happened right after that meeting—the one you left early because you were so upset to see me there. Just admit it, you waited until I unlocked the door and turned the alarm off, then you snuck inside when I went upstairs.”

“What do you take me for?” Hatti questioned. “I am hardly some sort of...” Her voice faltered. “Thug.”

“Then talk to me. Please.”

She took a step back like she was going to close the door, but instead she opened it all the way. “Fine. Come in.”

Juniper hesitated a moment. Hatti’s shock at what she’d told her seemed genuine, but what if it wasn’t? Juniper couldn’t very well back down now, though.

The door opened directly into Hatti’s living room. There were hardwood floors under a well-worn oriental rug. The furniture was antique, but what really surprised Juniper were the numerous photos on the walls—photos of the Gothic Haunt.

Juniper turned to Hatti. “These photos are fabulous.”

“Yes.”

She stepped aside when Juniper moved to get a closer look. There were photos of people of the past standing by the Mansion. Much older photos were displayed on the next wall. These were back when it had been owned by the Doctor’s family and they were all sepia’s and black-and-white.

Juniper turned around. “Where did you get them?”

“My father.” She motioned to the sofa and Juniper followed her lead and took a seat. “He always went on about that house. He just loved his cousin’s house.”

“So, you’re related to Helen. Why didn’t you say anything to me before when I was picking your brain over Victoria and the Doctor?”

“Because Helen and I didn’t get on very well. The fact that she was my cousin is something I don’t like to broadcast, then or now.” That sounded reasonable to Juniper. “Anyway, enough about that,” Hatti said. “That’s not why you’re here.”

Juniper gave her the full rundown, beginning with the vandalism before Feliz was murdered. “After the meeting tonight, I went back to the Gothic Haunt to pick something up I’d forgotten earlier, and when I went to leave, I saw a paper bag on top of the bar that hadn’t been there when I came in. When I opened it, there was dog poop inside.”

“Oh,” Hatti said. “How revolting.”

Juniper nodded. “There was a note in the bag that said, get out of my house or next time it will be you on the cellar floor.”

“That’s terrible! You’ve really had a bad time of it,” she said. “I had no idea all this was going on. You really thought I was behind all this?”

“I did—at least between leaving the Gothic Haunt and arriving here.”

“That house was important to my father but I would never kill for it. Besides, I thought about what you said at the meeting and it’s possible my grandfather would have liked to see that house full of life again.” Hatti gave her a slight smile. “I was just writing you a letter.” Hatti pointed to the handwritten letter on the coffee table. Hatti’s handwriting was nothing like the writing from the threatening note.

Was it possible Juniper had actually won her over?

“You said someone is getting in,” Hatti said, “even though there’s no sign of a break-in?”

Juniper nodded. “It’s baffling. I can’t figure it out, and neither can the police or the alarm company.”

Hatti smiled. “I can.” There was a twinkle in her eyes as her smile got wider.

Juniper was starting to think maybe she really was a nutcase.

Then Hatti stood and walked over to the wall where she removed one of the photos. “The police don’t know about this.” She handed the picture to Juniper and returned to her seat.

It was a grainy black-and-white shot of a cavernous brick room. Juniper didn’t understand. “What does this have to do with the Gothic Haunt?”

Hatti clapped her hands together, very pleased with herself. “This, my dear, is how your murderer is going in and out.” She leaned forward. “By using the tunnels.”

Thirty Two

T HERE was no way around it. Hatti's bubble had to be burst. The old woman had seemed so happy to have solved the case.

"I'm sorry, Hatti, but we already know about the tunnels. They lead to the neighbor's barn which was the mansion's old carriage house and to the cemetery on the hill behind the house. We sealed both of them up after the haunting incident in October," Juniper said.

Hatti leaned back in her seat and gave a sly wink. "Well then, you know of just two of the many passages that run from the Inn."

It wasn't possible. "But how? I would certainly know if there were more tunnels under my Inn," Juniper said. "We looked into it. We even had the plans for the house reviewed."

"They're not on any building plan, but they're definitely there."

"Then where is the entrance? The basement walls are stone." Then Juniper remembered the old shelves on the walls. Could it be behind one of those?

"It's there. I'm sure of it."

"More tunnels. Under the Inn."

Was it really possible that the tunnels were simply forgotten, except by the old-timers like Hatti's dad, who'd

taken pictures of them.

“There were half a dozen ways to enter the tunnels. And that’s only the ones I knew about. From what I remember my dad telling me, there were entrances from some of the other businesses in the area for rum running and such back in the day.”

Everything made sense now. Someone else knew about the tunnels and was using that knowledge to get in and out of the Inn without being detected, making it look like the house was plagued by a poltergeist, except for the one time the alarm had been activated.

Juniper needed to find the tunnel entrance.

Hatti agreed to meet her at the Gothic Haunt the next morning to help her look.

Juniper arrived at the Gothic Haunt raring to go. She’d spent a sleepless night thinking about the tunnels and trying to figure out where the entrance could be. She took in the walnut paneled walls and wine racks, slate flooring, and the recessed lights twinkling like dimmed stars. Before Jack and Juniper had refinished it, there had been old steel shelves along the walls.

When Jack arrived at seven-thirty, he found her in the cellar on her hands and knees, examining a space under one of the built-in shelves. “What are you doing down here?”

“Looking for a secret door.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess. You found one of those old detective novels Eve likes to read and you’ve

got an idea.”

“Did someone once tell you that you were funny, or something?” Juniper said as they climbed the stairs. “Because they were lying.”

He slid onto a bar stool with a sly grin. “What are you really doing?”

Juniper took the seat beside him. “Remember that meeting I went to last night?”

He nodded.

“It didn’t go very well at first.” Juniper told him about Hatti storming out of the meeting and what happened after that. As soon as Juniper got to the part about the dog poop, he interrupted.

“I thought you were going to call me when you were going to be here late.”

Good thing she skipped telling him about the note. “I stopped on the spur of the moment and I thought I’d be in and out.”

“That’s not the point. It could have been much worse. You could have been hurt.”

“Sweetheart, you think I don’t know that? I’m not going to let someone chase me out of my own home. We’re supposed to move in today. What will I do then—avoid coming out of the attic? If I’d planned on being here more than a minute or two, I would have locked the door and set the alarm.”

“I’m not going to lecture you—not that it would do any good,” he said. “What happened after that?”

Juniper filled him in on her visit to Hatti's house and what she told her about the tunnels. "She's adamant about it, and she even showed me old photographs of them. Anyway, she's coming here soon and we're going to look for the opening."

"So that's why you were down on the floor. Here I thought you were trying to trick me into giving you mouth to mouth."

"You're on to me, Sherlock. Clearly my seductive games are no match for your deductive skills." Juniper skipped around to the serving side of the bar.

He followed her around the bar top and cupped her face with his hands, kissing her full on the mouth, a stolen kiss, bold and lustful. His arm wrapped around her waist and he pulled her against him. Juniper came alive and claimed him with equal passion. She was pretty sure he was about to take it to the next level when they heard "Ahem."

They jumped apart.

"Little early in the morning for hanky-panky, isn't it?" Eve said with a big grin on her face.

"It's not what you think," Juniper stammered.

"I may be old, but there's nothing wrong with my vision, you know," Eve said.

"Maybe not," Jack said. "But you sure know how to overstay a welcome." He squeezed Juniper's hand. "I'll be outside. I have some work to get back to."

Eve grinned again. "Looks to me you were already hard at work."

Juniper heard Jack laughing as he went out the door.
Juniper told Eve about Hatti and the tunnels.

She nodded. "I heard rumors about them, but I figured they were just stories. It's too bad Lulu's on that cruise. She would surely know, wouldn't she?"

"I don't know about that. I don't think so. I think she would have mentioned more tunnels to me after what happened with Helen."

"Maybe, but Lulu did have a lot on her plate dealing with the loss of Kaitlyn. Not to mention, Peter was recovering in the hospital and Helen was headed to jail for everything she'd done to her. It might have slipped Lulu's mind."

"True, but she couldn't even bare to read Victoria's diary. Oh, that reminds me she gave that to me and I told the ghost hunter I would have a look through it to see if she left any clues."

Thirty Three

O NCE again, Pike discovered what was going on before Juniper had a chance to tell her. This time Juniper blamed it on Eve, who'd gone to the cafe to pick up that day's special: Santa's Cinnamon Buns.

It was a little after nine when Pike tracked Juniper down on the third floor where she was unpacking and organizing her books on the shelves in the hopes of finding Victoria's diary.

"Why didn't you call me?" She stood in the open doorway to Juniper's new living room. "I had to hear about the tunnels secondhand."

Juniper laughed. "Well, maybe you shouldn't make something called Santa's buns and you wouldn't attract such an unsavory and loud-mouthed crowd. I'd had all the crude jokes about Santa that I can take."

"Tell me about it. Who knew? Anyway, we'll call it even." She sat down on her sofa. "Now spill. Eve told me a little bit—that Hatti told you about some tunnels. How did you get her to talk to you?"

"I accused her of leaving that little present, she was appalled and she invited me in." Juniper told her the rest of the story.

"You know, entering from the inside is the only thing that makes sense. That explains why I never saw anyone,"

Pike said.

“Pardon?”

“It’s so simple, and it explains why I didn’t see anything the couple of nights I watched the place.”

“You actually staked out the place?”

“Of course I did. I was safe. Penny was with me.”

Juniper laughed. “I did, too.” They talked for another minute or two, then Pike had to get back to the cafe. Before she left, Pike made Juniper promise to keep her informed. Not that she had a choice in that matter—she’d find out somehow... ahem... Eve, like she always did.

Juniper finished setting up the bed and unpackaged the new sheets she’d purchased. The bed was now ready for their first overnight stay.

She headed downstairs to wait for Hatti in the taproom. Finn was in the kitchen cooking up a storm, she smelled sausage and garlic. Eve sat at one of the tables, and had begun telling her a story when Hatti turned up at ten.

Juniper went over to greet her. “Thanks for coming.”

Hatti looked around the room. “This isn’t what I expected.”

“It’s not the heinous brothel you thought it’d be?” Eve said.

“Eve!” If Hatti weren’t standing between them, Juniper would have elbowed her.

Hatti smiled. “I deserved that.”

“You sure did,” Eve said with a grin.

Juniper waited while Hatti took everything in and then asked Eve to see if Jack could join them.

Hatti finally turned to her, and said, "This is very nice. I'm glad to see you've kept the overall look."

"Would you like to see the wine cellar?"

"Very much so."

Juniper led her down the stairs and into the wine cellar.

"Oh my." She touched one of the stone walls. "It's beautiful, just like the photos."

"Good. I love historic houses and I want this to be a place where people can come and imagine what history looked like."

Hatti reached over and touched Juniper's arm. "I need to apologize to you. I'm afraid I misjudged you terribly. You've made this place a home again, just as it should be. A museum would be wrong here."

"You haven't given up on that entirely, I hope. All those pictures you have are amazing. I thought maybe—" Before Juniper could suggest anything, Eve swung open the door and poked her head through the doorway.

"Hey, Chatty-Hatti, are you going to show us these tunnels or not? Let's get this show on the road." She went back out.

"Definitely a way with words," Hatti said. "Shall we?"

She pointed to the wall of wine. "I remember this part of the basement from Dad's pictures, but obviously these shelves are new." She crossed the room and confidently

pointed to an area beside the wine racks. "I feel like the door would have been right here." Hatti turned to Juniper and Eve. "But it's blocked off now so that wouldn't make much sense, would it?"

The wall was cold and damp under Juniper's fingers. Jack, Eve, and Hatti soon joined her, and between the four of them, no spot was left untouched. There was no door, and no sign a door had ever been there.

"Hmm. Maybe it was the other wall," Hatti said.

A stone wall with no door or opening anywhere.

"That can't be." She shook her head. "I'm sure it would have been here." Hatti circled the basement, studying the walls closely. "I don't understand it. It should be here. I'm sure of it."

"Hatti," Juniper said, "it was a long time ago and you're going by old stories and pictures. It's not your fault." Juniper tried to let her down gently. "There may have been tunnels here at one time but maybe they were closed up. I don't see any way into them from here."

Hatti placed her hands on her hips. "Hmm, you could be right but nothing else makes sense. I'm going to go home and look through my dad's papers and see if he documented anything else about the tunnels. I also have some blueprints of the downtown buildings at the historical office. I'll dig them out as well. I should have done that in the first place. See if I can connect the dots."

Juniper wished her luck. She wasn't hopeful she'd find anything worthwhile.

Sweaty and grimy, she plopped down on a chair in the taproom after Hatti left. "Well, that was a bust."

"Maybe not," Jack said.

Juniper leaned back in her chair and sighed. If she hadn't been preoccupied and disappointed over what she thought of as "the tunnel business," she might have felt excited at the prospect of being alone with Jack in their new home. She'd been so sure Hatti would lead her to uncovering how the killer was getting in.

Jack reached over the table and put his hand over hers. "Stop fretting. Just because Hatti couldn't find them doesn't mean we won't."

"But where? The walls are stone."

"Maybe it's behind the stone."

"If that's the case, that's not how the killer got in."

"Then there has to be another way in," Jack said. "This house was vacant for a long time, right?"

"Yep. Several years."

"Chances are, whoever is coming in here was able to come and go as he pleased before we bought the place. He or she didn't have to worry about anyone seeing."

"So."

"Hear me out. They would have known that whoever bought this place would see the opening, explore the tunnel, and discover what they were up to."

Juniper didn't quite get where this was going, but nodded anyway.

Jack got up and paced beside the table while he talked. "So he or she covered it up."

"Okay, but that still leaves one big plot hole in the theory. The million-dollar question, really: if they covered it up, how are they getting in to torture me?"

He grinned like a kid. "That's what we need to figure out."

"You're not helpful."

"You're not following me. My guess is the entrance is covered, but it opens up somehow."

"Like a secret passageway?" Juniper laughed. "And you accused me of reading Eve's spy novels."

He stopped pacing, rested his hands on the table, and leaned over. "I never did get properly seduced."

"And you never will unless we find that tunnel entrance and solve this mystery." Before she knew it he had scooped her up and slung her over his shoulder.

"What do you say we try out that new bed?"

"Jack, put me down. There are people here."

"There are always going to be people here, Junie, it's an Inn. I suggest you get used to it." Jack carried her up the stairs while she rotated between laughter and swear words.

"Jack." Her voice grew serious when he reached the third step. He set her down.

"What is it?"

"Look."

Jack looked at the bottom of the stairs where she was pointing but he didn't seem to see anything.

“What am I looking at? Did you find the hidden door?”

“You can’t see her?” Juniper asked, turning to look at Jack’s blank face.

“See who?”

“Victoria.” But the ghost was gone when she turned back.

“That was the longest I’ve ever seen her for. She must be getting stronger. She was almost solid, not just a floating light. Daemon hoped she would get strong enough to tell us who was behind this. Of course at the time we thought maybe it was a poltergeist.”

“Daemon?”

“Daemon Wraith. The ghostbuster.” Juniper replied. “That reminds me, have you seen her diary? Remember the little leather pocketbook that Lulu gave us?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, I think I saw the box you packed it in. I’ll have a look later.”

Juniper got her second wind after she ate. Finn and Jack had moved the bulk of the furniture in and the three of them had sat down and eaten ham and swiss sandwiches from Deer’s deli. Jack was now looking for Victoria’s diary while Juniper made a list of things she still had to do before the opening. One of the things on her list was to check on the order she’d placed with Louise. This was as good a time as any, so she told Jack where she was going and headed out. Louise was putting the finishing touches on a cheese display when Juniper entered her shop. Jelly’s mingled with

jars of nuts, and Louise had layered packaged cheeses all through it.

“Your display is gorgeous,” Juniper said. “I’ve never seen a cheese shop look so stylish before.”

Louise just about beamed. “Thanks.” She sighed. “I have a bride coming in today who wants a cheese theme at her wedding. Must be nice to be a bride,” she said, sounding defeated.

“I take it Rudolph is still being...” Juniper searched for a word.

“A pain in the rear.” Louise finished it for her.

“Why didn’t you tell me Rudolph was the one telling people I was selling the Inn?”

Louise’s face reddened. “I’m sorry, Junie. I should have said something, but he didn’t actually say you were selling, he said he thought you would.”

That was the same thing, in Juniper’s mind. “Well, I talked to him yesterday and straightened him out. But that’s not why I’m here. I wanted to check to see if everything was on schedule.”

Louise said it was, and they discussed when she should start putting things in place.

Before Juniper left, Louise asked her how the meeting had gone. Juniper told her about the meeting, Hatti, and the tunnels.

“Ooh, secret tunnels sound so mysterious,” she said. “You’re living a movie plot.”

Juniper laughed. “Yes, a horror movie.”

"I guess so," she said. "Keep me posted on those tunnels. If you find a way in, I'd love to see them."

"Will do."

The phone rang as Juniper was getting ready to leave the Inn. Finn had already gone and, by four, she'd decided to call it quits, too. They were having dinner at Jack's parents place. Juniper was tempted to let the call go to voice mail, but made herself answer it. Hallelujah. It was the Building Inspector. She'd called days ago to schedule the final inspection, and he was calling to let her know that he couldn't make it but that someone else would be there the next morning.

Thank goodness, with only two days to go. She was going to miss a day of sledding at the Bohemian Caravan Christmas Festival with Jack and his family but this was the big inspection that would permit her to open the taproom, so what choice was there?

Thirty Four

JACK and Juniper spent their first night together watching old Christmas movies in their new bed at the Gothic Haunt. Juniper didn't want to take any chances that there would be sabotage again before the big inspection. Before bed and then again in the morning, they walked through each room, checking and double-checking everything. Juniper was relieved to find all was in order.

Juniper had some time before the inspector was due to arrive, so she went over to Cookies and Corsets to grab a cappuccino while Jack headed off with Pike, Finn and his family for a day of fun at the Caravan Manor's Winter Carnival. Jack had offered to stay back to keep her company but there was no point in both of them missing out. Besides, this was a tradition for the town, not to mention his nieces and nephews would have been heartbroken to sled without him.

One of Pike's part-time baristas was at the counter, which was typical for a Saturday.

Suddenly, they heard a series of loud bangs, causing both women to jump in surprise. They looked around in confusion for a second, then both suddenly realized the explosions they were hearing were fireworks.

As the tension began to leave their bodies, they both began to laugh. Juniper ran a hand through her blonde hair.

"I guess they must be doing a trial run on tomorrow's New Year's Eve fireworks display."

They chatted while she made the cappuccino, then Juniper took it back to the mansion with her. Juniper had just finished her coffee when the doorbell to the Inn buzzed.

She swung the heavy wood door open and was surprised to see the man from the deli—Rudolph's friend.

"Hello, the name's Red Birch."

He showed her the paperwork and explained what he was going to look for. Thirty minutes later he was done.

"Congratulations," He said with a smile. "You passed."

Juniper could have hugged him. "Thank you. Considering we have a big launch planned for tomorrow, that's mighty good news and, let me tell you, it's nice to finally get some good news," Juniper said. "Come back after we open and dinner is on the house."

"Will do and I'll bring the wife, but no freebies necessary. Someone might insinuate I'm on the take."

"Oh, my." Juniper laughed, unsure as to whether he was being serious or not.

"Don't laugh. You wouldn't believe how often..." He stopped and shook his head. "Oh, well." He had her sign off on the inspection and they chatted another minute or two, then he was off to his next job.

When he was gone, the reality that the Gothic Haunt was opening the next day on New Year's Eve hit Juniper and she squealed with joy. She did a little dance around the room. They passed! The Gothic Haunt was a go. After so

much hard work and so many things that had gone wrong, they were actually going to open. With tears in her eyes, she looked up toward the ceiling. She could almost hear Feliz gloating.

She sent an email off to her staff with the confirmed schedule for the next day letting them know the good news and then called Jack. Sadly, she got his voicemail. Perhaps she'd head over to Caravan Manor and catch up on the Christmas festivities. As she passed by the basement door she stopped. The tunnels. She hadn't given them a thought all day.

Was it possible they missed something yesterday? They'd checked all the walls for an opening, except those blocked by the new shelving. The floor was solid so there was nowhere for a trapdoor, but it wouldn't hurt to take one more look. Juniper went back to her parlor and grabbed a flashlight just in case. She had just started down the stairs when her phone rang.

It was Jack. "Hello, my love. How are you?"

"Jealous." Juniper exclaimed.

"Well, don't worry. You missed a horrendous day," he said. Juniper heard his nieces giggle in the background.

"You're a filthy liar but thank you for not rubbing it in."

"Are you all curled up on the couch with a book or relaxing in the tub?" he asked.

"Neither. I'm in the basement."

"Of course you are."

“I thought I’d do one last search for the tunnel entrance and then I’d come join you for some egg nog and sledding.”

“Well, that sounds fantastic, but how about peppermint schnapps and a Christmas movie in our new place instead? We can go sledding tomorrow. The wee ones got soaked. I’m just dropping them off to their mother now.”

Juniper crossed the basement floor to the first wall they’d checked the day before. “Sounds like a very merry night to me. I should be done by the time you get here—especially if I don’t find anything.”

“Alright. Be careful. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Juniper stuffed her phone into the front pocket of her jeans once he hung up. There was plenty of light in the basement, but she turned the flashlight on anyway and aimed the beam at the wall. She moved the light in a grid pattern, then did the same to the other walls. The walnut shelves were laid out in long rows like a bookstore, only it was wine bottles instead of books that filled the diagonal alcoves.

In the center of the room was an island with shelves where the cases and boxes of wine could be stored and on top of the table was a wine wheel rack.

Nothing.

Juniper headed up the stairs and was about to turn off the flashlight when she suddenly had the very distinct feeling she was being watched. She stopped walking and looked around.

Still nothing.

She walked back into the wine cellar and turned in a circle, trying to feel where the sensation was coming from. This was silly. It was time to go upstairs. As Juniper paced back through the door, her breath caught in her throat. Right there halfway up the stairs was the white woman. A split second later the ghost of Victoria disappeared.

Juniper took a few deep breaths and then once again headed up the stairs and that's when it dawned on her. She always appeared when Juniper was on that midway step and this time she'd reversed it and she'd appeared on the step, herself. Juniper thought long and hard about what that could mean and then she remembered thinking once that not all of the stairs sounded the same. Some creaked and there were a couple that felt like they had more bounce. At the time she'd added it to her checklist. They couldn't have these stairs rotting out. Now Juniper wondered if it was something else. Juniper banged her foot down on one of the suspicious steps and it almost sounded hollow. She went down a couple and banged again.

Thud. Thud.

Something was off about these stairs. It was a long shot, but she'd checked everywhere else. She bent down and shined the light over the seams of the stairs. Then she remembered one of the stories she'd heard from Jack's brother at dinner. He'd mentioned that the most sophisticated priest hole was located under the boards of

the grand stairway in Harvington Hall. As Juniper tugged, two of the steps moved.

Holy holly.

The stairs were linked by a hinge that allowed them to be lifted as one. Juniper looked into the secret compartment under the steps and, sure enough, there was a ladder down. Not that she needed the ladder, you could pretty much jump down into the space. Hatti had been right after all. There was a tunnel, and she'd just found the entrance.

At least Juniper thought it was the entrance. It had to be. The hinges were as quiet as those on a brand-new door. Someone had kept them well oiled.

Juniper dropped down into the hole. Her heart beat faster as she stared down the tunnel as if it were the barrel of a gun—somewhere in that dark abyss was a murderer. She slipped her phone from her pocket to check the time. When would Jack arrive? She didn't want to wait. He'd have to catch up with her. She went in. The passageway was damp but, surprisingly, there were no visible cobwebs or spiders anywhere.

When she'd gone about sixty feet, the passage widened and opened into the cavernous space from Hatti's photograph. The historian was going to be thrilled when Juniper showed her. From here there were three more tunnels, each going in a different direction. Juniper walked a few feet into the one at her left and shined the light ahead. It looked like this one curved around behind the house, then straightened. She'd save it for last. She retraced her steps

and checked the passageway on the right. It was wide enough for three people to walk side by side, but it was not well kept. After a minute or so, she came to another passageway. It only took a couple of minutes to reach the end. There was a door. Juniper gripped the doorknob and hesitated. She had no idea what she'd find behind it. Juniper had to at least take a peek, then she'd go back and wait for Jack. Her scalp tingled with anticipation as she inched open the door.

Darkness. She scanned the room with her flashlight and saw that she was in a basement. Cardboard boxes lined the walls, and some were stacked in the center of the room. Empty crates were tossed in a pile in one corner.

Juniper moved up the stairs and entered the shop above. Holy Havarti.

This was the cheese shop.

Juniper crept quietly back down the stairs.

Accidentally tripping over one of the crates and knocking down a whole stack. She paused to see if Louise had heard but thankfully there was no movement.

When she started to move again, she noticed that one of the lids had popped off, pill bottles spilled out of the crates. Juniper picked one up. Ibuprofen. Now, why would Louise have a crate full of headache medicine? Juniper twisted the cap—her head was pounding and she could sure use one right now. Inside were tiny packets of white powder. Cocaine. No, not lovely Louise!

And here, she'd been practically keeping her up to date on the progress of her investigation. How stupid of Juniper. Louise probably laughed behind her back every time she left the store.

She walked to another crate and lifted the lid. Inside were multi-vitamins. Juniper twisted the cap open and, sure enough, the bottle was full of colorful candies. This was what Kaden had been talking about, the new street drug MOLLY or MDMA that was being sold to the local high school kids.

Juniper marched through the door, closing it softly behind her. The only illumination was from the flashlight Juniper still carried. She was beyond mad as she made her way back down the tunnel from where she'd come. When she'd safely reached her own basement and crawled up the ladder up through the opening in the stairs, she punched in Kaden's cell. His voice mail picked up.

"Kaden, it's me. Call me back as soon as you get this message. I found the killer. You're never going to believe it, but it's Louise and she's trafficking drugs. I just found a tunnel from her basement to mine." Juniper hit the end button and called Jack. He picked up on the first ring.

"I found it," Juniper said. "I found the tunnel."

"That's great!"

"It was under the stairs." Juniper started to tell him about Louise when a voice behind her said, "Hang up the phone if you want to live."

Juniper spun around. It was Rudolph.

Thirty Five

THE air had changed inside Juniper's basement, sending gooseflesh over her arms and a tendril of fear took root in her scalp and curled down her backbone. She'd been so focused on calling Kaden and Jack, she only now noticed that the basement lights were switched off.

Rudolph stepped out of the darkness, something strangely disagreeable flashed in his eyes. "I said hang up."

"I'll talk to you later," Juniper said into the phone.

"Wait! What is Rudolph doing there?" Jack said into her ear.

"Good question."

Jack mumbled an obscenity. "I'll be there in ten."

"Now!" Rudolph demanded.

Panic juttled through Juniper's limbs as thoughts snapped together in her brain like click-lock flooring. That wasn't just Louise's basement. She shared the building with Rudolph and he was the one with a pharmacy. How could she have been so stupid?

Instead of just disconnecting, she hit mute and then hit select on Penny's name. Penny would be able to hear them, but not the other way around. At least if she was going to be murdered, Penny would get the exclusive. She pocketed the phone. "Done," Juniper said.

He flicked the switch on the wall and turned on the overhead light. Juniper blinked at the sudden brightness of the room. Rudolph held a gun in one hand and a metal baseball bat in the other—Louise's bat. Rudolph had taken it. Oh God. It was the murder weapon after all. Juniper's stomach knotted.

"How about you turn around and climb back down into that tunnel, it looks like we've got ourselves a date," Rudolph said.

"I don't think so. You're not my type." Juniper wasn't going to show him how frightened she was.

"Smart and rich aren't important qualities to you?"

"More like slimy and rotten." For a split second she thought about bolting all the way up the stairs, but he'd already killed two people. Shooting her in the back would most likely make his day.

Rudolph moved behind her and jammed the gun into her back. "I really don't want to shoot you, Juniper, but I will if I have to. It won't be all that difficult to make your death look like a robbery gone bad."

"I wouldn't count on that. You heard me talking to Jack, and he's on his way."

"So, I'll have to kill him, too."

"Four murders in one place will look awfully suspicious. Besides, I called Kaden. He knows I found out you killed Feliz and Sally."

Rudolph laughed—it was a twisted sound. "You really are a bad liar. I heard you leave the message. You didn't tell

him it was me. You said it was Louise. Poor, poor Louise. It will be so easy to frame her. I've already been setting it up, you know, just in case."

Juniper's heart sank. He was right. But Penny was hopefully listening. There would be one other person who knew the truth.

Rudolph prodded her toward the opening under the stairs. Juniper would delay it as long as she could and hope for the best. If he took her back to his store, she'd have a fighting chance. The store was open, and if she screamed, someone would surely come running.

They reached the large open area. Instead of heading down the tunnel that led to his store, he pushed her toward the passageway she hadn't explored yet.

"Where are we going?" Juniper asked.

"Shut up and keep walking." He jammed the gun against her back and Juniper winced. Once they were a few feet inside the tunnel, he threw a switch and a string of lights along the ceiling flashed on. She'd wondered about that. It would be hard to move merchandise in the dark.

"This tunnel goes to the river, doesn't it?"

He didn't answer.

Juniper hoped Penny was picking all this up. The cell phone signal in her basement had been good, but she wasn't sure how long that would last in here.

Rudolph ignored her. The tunnel seemed to go on forever, but it could only have been a few blocks. A quarter of a mile at most. As they walked, she searched for some

kind of escape path but there was nothing. The only way out was back the way they'd come. They soon reached a set of hardwood steps at the end of the tunnel and Rudolph ordered her to go up. There was a door, and he reached and slid the lock over, and pushed it open. "Out," he said.

They exited it into some sort of barn, there were broken down boxes but otherwise it was eerily empty.

"What is this place?"

"Don't worry about it."

"This is Louise's barn, isn't it? This is where you get your shipments. The trucks pull in here and you can unload under cover. And this is why you've been dating her—so you can keep her busy whenever you're getting a shipment. Smart."

"Less chatter and more movement," Rudolph grumbled as he pushed her outside the barn.

It was snowing again but Juniper could make out the Inn in the far distance below. She shivered, her sweater was wool, but it wasn't quite as warm as her coat. Of course, she would be a lot colder if Rudolph made her walk on the river like she suspected he was going to. The river looked frozen to the naked eye but everyone knew it wasn't solid in December. Her heart pounded so hard she could hear it. She had to think of something. And fast.

If she ran, Rudolph wouldn't hesitate to shoot her.

He nudged her with the gun again. "Keep walking."

Juniper wasn't going down without a fight. She planted her feet and spun around so she facing Rudolph.

She could see into the barn. "I'm not going anywhere," She said. "Not until I get some answers. You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you anything."

"Well, I'm asking anyway. Why, Rudolph? I don't understand. I don't understand why you did any of this. Not the sabotage, and especially not the murders."

"Why? You want to know why?" he said. "That building should have been mine. Helen Patone was my partner. She was supposed to buy that place from you. I went out of the country to deal with our suppliers, and when I returned, she was in jail. All of our plans. slipped away just like you're going to...under the ice,"

"You mean your drug smuggling business? That's why you needed full tunnel access, isn't it?" Juniper caught a glimpse of Jack's head coming up through the hatch. She forced her gaze to stay on Rudolph so she didn't give Jack away.

"That house was supposed to be mine. But you had to have your little Ghostly Inn."

"Gothic Haunt," Juniper corrected.

"Whatever."

Jack was inching closer. He crouched down behind boxes as he moved forward.

"So you killed two people trying to drive us out."

"Soon to be three," he said. "Your chef figured out it was me. I dropped my phone that night in the taproom, and he found it. I hid and listened while he called you. I had this with me." He held up the bat. "I'd been planning to use it on

your fixtures. Instead, I turned on the basement light and smashed a wine bottle, luring him into the cellar, and when he came to nose around I took care of him.”

Juniper was going to be sick. She took a deep breath and swallowed. Poor Feliz. Tears filled her eyes. Juniper blinked them away. She was not going to let Rudolph see her cry.

“What about Sally?” Her mouth was so dry, she could barely get the words out.

Rudolph shrugged. “Don’t tell me you’re actually upset about that one. You should be thanking me. She was trying to steal Jack from you. Everyone knows how much she hates you.” He chuckled to himself, “and her boyfriend was so outspoken about competing for business. I could tell you were on to me. It was just too perfect of an opportunity to miss. So, I planned to set it up to make it look like Sally was behind the sabotage to throw you off my scent. I drugged her vitamin water when she stopped into the convenience store and planted her in your basement using the tunnel. She was supposed to get caught inside after I demolished the place, but she woke up early and saw me. Basically she signed her own death warrant.” He motioned with the gun. “I’ve had enough of this. Time to go for a polar dip.”

That was the moment Jack had been waiting for. He sprang up and tackled Rudolph from behind. They crashed to the ground. The gun flew from Rudolph’s hand and skittered down the slope onto the ice. Juniper watched in terror as they rolled on the ground. Jack was much bigger,

but Rudolph was crazy. Sharp winter wind sliced through Juniper's sweater as she contemplated how to help Jack. The bat lay on the ground near them but she couldn't get close enough to get it.

Jack rolled on top of Rudolph and pressed one hand to his throat to hold him down. He drew his other hand back for a punch just as Rudolph grabbed Jack's wrist and used it for leverage to pull Jack off him. Before Jack could react, Rudolph jumped to his feet. He grabbed the bat and swung it down toward Jack's head. Juniper screamed.

Jack rolled away at the last second and the bat struck the ground with a clang. Jack kicked the bat out of Rudolph's hands. It rolled to her feet and Juniper snatched it up.

Before Rudolph could go after Jack again, she drew the bat back with both hands and swung with all her might. The bat hit Rudolph's knee with a sickening thud and Juniper heard the bone crack. He fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

The bat dropped from her hand and she turned to Jack, who pulled her into his chest.

He held her and they stood like that until they heard sirens. "You called the police?" Juniper said.

"No, I didn't." Jack said.

"Get away from me!"

They swung around in time to see Rudolph backing up onto the ice. He had a crazed look on his face and the gun in his hand was pointed at them.

"Rudolph, no!" Juniper shouted. "Stop moving!"

But it was no use. He wasn't looking at Jack and Juniper or Penny, who was now creeping up the path to the left of him. Not that she could do much good. She'd go through the ice with him if she attempted a tackle.

He was looking off in the distance in a complete daze when multiple flashes of light burst onto the scene.

Rudolph seemed to have snapped out of it for a moment and swung the gun wildly, back and forth between where Juniper and Jack stood, and the empty graveyard that backed onto the Inn's hill.

When Juniper turned, she saw what had him so freaked out. It was Victoria in all her ghostly beauty. She was slowly gliding between the gravestones toward him. He shot the gun off and just as he did the ice cracked and he fell through.

Thirty Six

JACK stood on a chair and tapped his spoon against the side of an empty champagne glass. No one heard it over the din. Juniper was behind the counter, making a peppermint schnapps coffee for one of the guests. So far, opening night had been everything she'd dreamed it would be. They had a packed house. Every table was full, and it was standing room only at the bar. Jack's entire family was there, along with all of their neighbors and friends. Juniper's parents and siblings were due to arrive the next day, and everyone had raved about everything from the local wine and the holiday flavored craft beers to the food pairings.

The servers rotated throughout the party now, passing out the midnight champagne while Jack tried again to get everyone's attention, to no avail. Finally Eve pulled a rape whistle out of her massive purse and let loose an ear-splitting blast. The crowd fell silent in an instant.

Jack shook his head. "Holy silent night, I really need one of those." He was greeted with laughter. "Anyway, the New Year is almost upon us. Please take a glass of champagne so we can toast and afterward our amazing friend and multi-talented chef, Finn Valentine, will be playing for us.

There was a round of applause and Finn took a mock-bow.

"Please don't expect too much. His paella is better than his playing," Jack teased.

"Hey. I resemble that remark," Finn retorted.

"Now before we begin the countdown, I just wanted to congratulate the girl of the hour..." He pointed in Juniper's direction. "My beautiful partner, Juniper Palmer. She has beaten the odds—"

"And Rudolph Windsor," Eve hollered.

"Yes, she did do that," Jack agreed.

"I heard Rudolph's got a red knee," Penny joked.

"He's also got frostbite," Eve added. Everyone laughed.

Juniper thought back to when the police had arrived. It had been just as Rudolph went under and they'd managed to get him out before he drowned. It had been his lucky day—well, he had gotten arrested, so perhaps not such a lucky day.

"But in all seriousness," Jack went on. "Junie has always dreamed of owning a Victorian Inn and tonight, we can see all that dreaming has paid off."

Someone yelled, "Hear! Hear!"

"She's had a rough few weeks, but she didn't quit. She didn't give up her dream, and we'd like to thank you all for turning out to celebrate with us."

"Speech, speech," the room chanted.

Juniper's face grew hot at the cheers to speak. Jack jumped off the chair and lifted her up onto it. "Come on, Junie, appease your fans and give us your New Year's resolution."

Juniper thought about what she'd say. Part of her wanted to say that she hoped to give up finding dead bodies in her house but that was probably not the right thing to share. Instead she raised her voice and said, "I promise to pay closer attention to Victoria."

Murmurs crossed the room. Some people knew about the ghost of the Gothic Haunt, while others were baffled by the comment. Juniper's close friends smirked, they knew what she meant. Victoria had been trying to tell her about those stairs the whole time, and Victoria had saved Juniper and Jack from being shot. The lovers had looked away for only a moment but a moment was all that it took for Rudolph to scramble and retrieve his gun. If Victoria hadn't summoned the strength to appear in the graveyard, who knew what would have happened.

A sharp bang rang out and a giant green warning firework lit up the night sky just as Finn began to play the sweet, nostalgic "Auld Lang Syne" on the piano.

"Must be midnight," Jack shouted.

Some of the guests scattered to grab their coats while others gathered around the piano to sing along with Finn and Pike. "Should auld acquaintance be forgot, And never brought to mind," The familiar words rang out.

Juniper pulled her coat and boots on and followed Jack out onto the front lawn to enjoy a private moment with him to the backdrop of fireworks. You could still hear the singing outside, punctuated by the loud explosions of pyrotechnics. Most everyone had joined them now, and the show was coming to an end. A blue rocket lit up the sky long enough for Juniper to identify Hatti walking away. "Hatti, wait." Juniper ran to catch up.

"Is everything okay?"

Tears trickled down Hatti's face.

"It's better than okay," she said, scrubbing at her cheeks with a balled up Kleenex. "Thanks for including me tonight, Juniper. It's been a long time since I had that much fun."

Juniper pulled her in for a hug. "You're so welcome."

"I can't help but feel like my father is smiling down on us right now," Hatti said. "I only wish I'd told you earlier about those darn tunnels..."

"It all worked out. You know, that reminds me: I wanted to talk to you about your pictures."

Hatti tilted her head. "Yes?"

"I was wondering if you would consider putting them on display here inside the Inn?" Juniper smiled.

"Really? That's a great idea," Hatti said, "My father would be so pleased."

"That's not all. I also think those tunnels are part of the town's history. They need to be preserved." Juniper grinned at the surprise on her face. "I'd love to work with

you and the historical society to see what we could do with them. I was thinking maybe a tour? Or a ghost walk or something to incorporate them into the house and town.”

A tear made a track down Hatti’s face. “Yes, thank you.”

Jack came up behind Juniper after she walked Hatti to her car, and a thrill went through her when he pulled her in for a long kiss. “It was a great night but I can’t wait to just be alone with you.”

“It was,” Juniper said, and curled into him once again. “Still, I can’t help thinking it almost didn’t happen,” Juniper said as she looked across the road to Rudolph’s shops. “That creep was right under our noses and we didn’t see it. It makes my blood boil.”

“And poor Louise,” Jack said. “Has anyone heard from her?”

“I talked to her this morning. She brought the rest of the charcuterie over, but she’s not ready to face the public. She’s keeping the shop closed for another week.”

“She truly loved that monster, huh?”

“Yes, she was devastated that he’d used her. She’ll be okay,” Juniper said. “She’s just hurting right now.”

It was one in the morning by the time Finn stopped playing Christmas tunes on the piano. Everyone was gone now except Jack’s family, Finn, Pike and Eve. Jack and Juniper stood behind the bar putting glasses away. When they’d finished, Jack turned to Juniper and handed her a wrapped parcel.

“What is this?”

“It’ll help you with your resolution. I meant to give it to you this morning.”

Juniper tore the paper away and saw Victoria’s diary. “You found it.”

“I did. I thought I’d wrap it for the added suspense.”

She opened it and began to read just as she felt a tingling at the back of her neck.

“This is wonderful. I’m going to read it tonight. I want to thank Victoria for all her help lately and maybe the key to helping her move on is in this journal.”

“You want her to move on?”

Juniper looked up just as Victoria materialized in the doorway. “No, I like having her here, but I think it would be best for her to move on. There must be something keeping her here. Daemon Wraith is returning this month and he said he’d help me.”

Jack smiled. “Well then, I think this calls for some kind of toast.”

Juniper nodded, “I agree but I think I’m too tired for words.”

“I’ll make the toast, then.” He held up his glass. “To the prettiest bride who ever lived.”

“I better be—wait a minute. What . . . what did you say?”

“You heard me.”

Juniper laughed. “I did, but I think I missed something... like our engagement.”

He shook his head. “Nope. You didn’t miss a thing. I didn’t want to take a chance you’d say no again. So, I’m skipping that step and we’re just going to get married right here, right now.”

“Right now, and you’re not even going to ask me first?”

He shook his head. “No, because it wouldn’t matter what you said. I refuse to live without you, Juniper Palmer.”

“Really. Well, just so you know, my answer would have been yes.”

Jack held up his glass with one hand and placed his other hand on the small of her back and pulled her closer. “Oh, good... hey, Eve,” he mock-shouted. “You can go ahead and unbar the doors... she said yes.”

Juniper smirked as he slipped a diamond ring onto her finger—the same ring he’d proposed to her with many years ago. He’d hung onto it all that time. The thought warmed her heart. “Does this mean we can at least wait until I’ve had time to shower and buy a gown before we get hitched?”

He clinked his glass to hers. “I guess if you’re going to be high maintenance like that.”

Want more Bohemian Lake? Keep reading for a sneak peek at the second book in the Bohemian Lake series: *Gypsies, Traps and Missing Thieves*. Bonus: Yummy recipe.

One

Elbows propped against the wrought-iron railing of the manor's third-floor balcony, Mallory Vianu cradled her coffee for warmth. She gazed out over the snow-covered lake and tall pines of Gypsy Caravan Manor Resort and watched the big, wet snowflakes as they tumbled to the ground like feathers from a torn pillow.

Buzz.

Mallory reached inside the thick wool pocket of her sweater for her cellphone and scanned the incoming text message. "Nana!" She reached back and flung open the suite's French doors, "Someone's dead in bed!"

"Bull-hooley," declared the cranky old woman from inside the apartment's kitchen.

"Someone's Dead Inn Bed & Breakfast. That's what Joelle wrote back." Mallory clicked on the text and held her phone out.

"Absolutely not. That is just the stupidest name I've ever heard."

"Come on, Nana, it's not stupid so much as it's cheesy, and it's a murder mystery game, so what did you expect?"

Mallory's nana—the cranky woman who'd now wandered out onto the balcony to join her—wrenched the smart phone from her hands. Her little white Shih Tzu, Abby,

clipped along at her side, ears perked. It was early in the morning but Nana was already artfully dressed in a classic oxford button-down, well-cut jeans, and a knit sweater. Her black and silver curls were pulled back and hidden under a colorful madras headwrap to reveal oversized hoop earrings.

At a petite five feet, she was the pinnacle of an adorably stylish French grandmother to anyone who didn't know her; however, Nana, as everyone in their small town of Bohemian Lake called her, descended from a powerful line of Roma people, and was not to be trifled with.

"How can you read anything on this tiny little screen? I might as well try to read the print off of a bloody eyelash."

Smiling, Mallory faced her grandmother. "You just need your glasses."

"Malhala, glasses are for mémères," Nana snapped. Malhala was Mallory's Roma name, which Nana only used when she meant business—such as now—so Mallory didn't bother to point out that Nana was, in fact, an old lady. That would not have gone over well. Abby barked twice, for good measure. They always sided together.

"Now, you write her back for me and tell her to come up with something else." She passed the phone back to Mallory.

"The event starts in an hour. Isn't it a little late to change things?"

"Yes, but Caravan Manor is hardly a bed-and-breakfast. It makes no sense. We offer fifteen bedrooms, a carriage house and two caravans."

“Well, what do you want to call it, then?” Mallory crossed her arms, knowing Nana wouldn’t have an answer.

“I don’t know. What was wrong with the Caravan Carnival thing?”

“That’s the theme, Nana. The Caravan Carnival’s Missing Coin is what the game is about. The Manor still needs a fictional name for the storyline. How did you hear about this company, anyway?”

“Eve Banter—you know, the one who’s always causing trouble, and dresses like a ho—”

“Nana!”

“What?! ...I was gonna say hooligan. Honestly, Mallory.”

“I know just what you were gonna say and we both know who Eve is.” Mallory sighed. She needed Irish cream in her coffee to deal with her wily grandmother this early in the morning. “So, Eve knows this Joelle woman?”

“Yes, Eve actually introduced her to your mother when they were teens. They chummed around a few summers. Apparently, her company is having money trouble, which is why she’s testing out this new business model where she takes the show on the road.”

“That’s unfortunate, but if she was a friend of Mom’s, then I’m happy we’re helping her out.”

“Indeed. Eve caught her up on our family history and explained how we offer mystery-themed events at the manor and so they’ve come up with a storyline that will suit us and some of our existing characters.”

“You mean our ghost?”

Nana cocked an eyebrow at her. “I meant our Roma ancestry and travelling caravan theme but, yes, they know about our ghost. Eve can hardly be expected to keep her yap shut, now can she?”

Mallory smirked. “So, it will be business as usual for us, only we won’t know who the murderer is for a change. Sounds great.”

“Exactly.”

“I look forward to being in the dark for once. Danior is going to be excited. Where is she, anyway?”

“Downstairs, helping with breakfast. She should be back any minute.”

“I guess we should stop talking about this, then. We don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

Nana’s white aura flickered with dark blue.

Mallory didn’t fully understand the complexities of her aura-reading capabilities yet. She could see aura’s change, pulse and flicker as plain as day but she hadn’t quite worked out the system as to what it all meant.

“Nana! What aren’t you telling me?”

“Well, however should I know what I don’t know?”

Mallory’s brain hurt watching the blue in Nana’s aura push and strain outward, “Never mind.” She’d figure it out later. Sometimes it felt like Nana was constantly testing her abilities. “How many of Joelle’s team are coming?”

“It’s best if the guest list is a secret. That’s why Lise handled the invites and Joelle handled the RSVP’s. All I know

is Joelle's team will show up along with the rest of the guests, this way no one will know who the planted actors are."

"Why do they plant actors?"

"To keep the plotlines running, of course, in case one of the participants isn't doing their job."

"And if we like it—we can offer it to our clients on a semi-regular basis. I can think of more than a few local companies that would be interested in just such a team-building event."

Nana frowned. "Tea bidding? What's that?"

"A t-e-a-m building event—it's an activity that companies pay to do when they want to enhance social relations and define roles within teams. You know, it teaches people to work together."

"Sounds terrible. Anyway, I do know that Eve's sister Michèle is coming. She's on the same train as Denise Beausoleil and Gloria Simard. They should all be here anytime. Did you make sure their rooms are ready? They are going to be cranky after that three-hour ride from Frontenac."

"Yes, Nana," Mallory answered. "The rooms were turned down last night and the kitchen staff will be providing a snack upon their arrival."

"Good. Denise is practically an Amazonian, and she loves to eat."

"Well, I hope they get here soon. I just checked the weather." Mallory held up the phone. "We're getting more

flurries.” She tucked an errant strand of her hair behind her ear and gazed longingly at the snow-covered caravan. It was permanently parked at the edge of the woods overlooking the frozen lake. Once a summer, Mallory would take holidays there. Contrary to Nana, who preferred the main floor socials, Mallory quite enjoyed her privacy. Not that she didn’t love running the Manor, but sometimes she just longed to stay in their third-story suite alone. “They say it will be whiteout conditions soon.”

The wind picked up in time to punctuate Mallory’s claim.

Nana waved her hand away as if to wave Mother Nature off. “I’m sure it will all be fine. I can’t wait to find out who I’ll be playing. I bet I’ll be assigned the brainy detective. Do you remember, I was always so good at solving those Scooby-Doo mysteries when you were little?”

Mallory rolled her eyes, but grinned. Nana was making it just too easy today. “I’m sure they’ll make you a detective, Nana, you have all the right qualities... nosy, accusatory...”

“Are you gonna give me sass all day?”

“Me? No way. That’s Danior’s job.” Mallory gave Nana a wink.

“Brrr...you guys are letting all the cold air in.” Danior said, stepping out onto the balcony to join them.

“You’re back.” Nana said.

“Yep, so when do we get into costume?”

Mallory glanced at Nana. “She knows? I thought we were surprising her in the foyer.” Well, that explained the

aura. The blue had been an indication of guilt and deception. She'd have to take note of that—knowing when Nana was being deceitful would be very useful.

“Sorry, toots, she must be nosy like me.”

“I saw Nana’s phone this morning. She needed me to read the text messages for her,” Danior clarified. “She hates wearing her glasses. They make her feel old.”

Mallory started to chime in but bit her tongue instead, best not to engage Nana right now. They needed to get downstairs and there was nothing that woman loved more than a good fight, especially one she thought she could win, which was *all of them*.

“Do you need a refill?” Nana asked, turning to walk back inside.

Mallory glanced down at her full mug of now lukewarm coffee. “No, I’m good.”

“Okay then, I’m going to start breakfast. French toast sound okay?” Nana said and disappeared back inside, closing the door behind her.

“So, has Nana told you yet?” Danior asked.

“Told me what?”

“About the guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy she’s setting you up with.”

“Noooo,” Mallory said with a groan and lowered her voice. “Dan, you have got to help me out here. The last guy she set me up with snored like a chainsaw. I thought I was on

a date with Leatherface, and that was the most attractive thing about him."

Danior giggled. "He couldn't have been that bad if you spent the night with him," she said.

"I didn't. He was narcoleptic and fell asleep at lunch!" Mallory grabbed her arm.

"Well, Nana told me all about this guy and he sounds perfect for you."

"No way. You've got to get me out of this," Mallory said under her breath as Nana returned.

"Oh, hey, Mal. I want you to meet someone—"

"I'm busy next weekend," Mallory said quickly.

"You are?" Nana said, looking at her with big innocent eyes.

"Yes," Mallory said, giving her a fake frown. "I'm booked up with readings."

"No, you aren't." Nana said. "I checked your schedule."

"The call just came in. A bachelorette weekend and I have to go to them."

"Well, that's no problem!" Nana said with a snap of her fingers. "You'll just have to wait an extra week to go out with him, if you like him. I think he might be staying in town for a while for work. You can ask him. He should be here soon."

"What do you mean... here soon? We have the murder mystery party today." Mallory repeated.

"I know, he's one of the guests and he is perfect for you. You know I'm rarely wrong about these things!" she

added as she bustled off.

Mallory turned sharply on Danior. "Why didn't you tell me he was coming to the party?"

"I'm not crossing Nana. You remember what she did to me the last time I lied for you."

Mallory smiled at the memory. "You're right," she said. "Nana is not to be trifled with."

"Why do you hate dating so much, anyway? I mean, spring is right around the corner—surely you want to have a spring fling?"

Mallory swirled the liquid around in her mug for a minute before answering her. "I don't think that's what the term means. And anyway, it's because guys look at me like I'm crazy. I do see dead people, after all. It's not exactly a turn-on."

"What? No one else is including that in their online dating profile?"

"Why yes, they all say I love long walks down scary hallways filled with tortured souls."

Danior threw her head back and gave a hearty laugh. "Well, I'm sure they don't all look at you like you're crazy but, anyway, who cares what they think? You shall not be intimidated by judgmental dudes who love pizza!"

"It's not that I'm intimidated," Mallory said defensively. "I just don't want to deal with it."

"What you need to find is a real man. Someone who's as cool as you," Danior mused. "And I swear, this guy that

Nana told me about, he just might be able to give you a run for your money.”

Mallory cocked a skeptical eyebrow at her and the smile brightened just a bit.

“Come on, Mal. You can't let life pass you by. You, more than anyone, should understand that.”

She had Mallory there. How many stranded spirits had she come across who were simply stuck because they refused to move forward while all around them the living marched on with their lives as the spirits just resentfully watched?

With a sigh Mallory said, “When you're right, you're right, Danior. Okay, tell me about the guy. Is he normal?”

Danior smiled brightly at her. “Oh, he's about as normal as you.”

Mallory cocked her head. “He's weird?”

“No. He sounds fabulous, and you won't get any more details from me since I don't actually know him.” She glanced at the clock on the wall and rolled her eyes. “Now, it's time to greet our fellow mystery opponents and get our character outlines.”

Two

A curious excitement rippled through the foyer as the ladies of the manor descended the main staircase. It was only 11:15 in the morning but it looked as though all the guests had already been checked in—the ones who hadn't cancelled thanks to the snowstorm, anyway.

Mallory inhaled the scent of warm, sugary dough and sighed in contentment as she took in the room. There was a group gathered around the bar to the left. Some were sipping coffee while others enjoyed mimosas. And there was even a buffet of snacks set up close by.

Nana interrupted Mallory's observations, "Ready to fall in love?"

Mallory gave Danior a sidelong glance and took the last sip of her coffee, "I'll do my best."

"I have a good feeling about this one, Mal," she said.

Mallory failed to remind her that she'd had a good feeling about the other three duds she'd fixed her up with and simply nodded.

Nana seemed to relax and leaned in to give her a hug. "That's my girl," she said.

"Awww. A hallmark moment," Mallory heard behind her, and she looked up to see that Eve had arrived. "What'd

I miss?" Eve asked as she hugged Nana.

"I've set Mallory up with a date," Nana said, releasing Eve.

"And she let you?" Eve said, giving Mallory a wink.

"Since when does that matter?" Danior asked.

Eve chuckled. "When's the blessed event?"

"I'm sitting right here, you know," Mallory grouched.

"You might as well be hog-tied," Eve retorted.

Nana ignored her. "Tonight. He is one of the players."

"Ooh... the mystery game. Sneaky!" She turned to Mallory. "If he's a dud, you can always figure out who the killer is and have him knocked off."

"He is not a dud!" Nana insisted. She leaned in and whispered in Eve's ear. Mallory tried to lean in, too, but they shooed her away.

Eve listened for a moment and then squealed, "That's perfect."

"I know," Nana replied.

Mallory was just about to demand they tell her about him when a young woman approached. She was a very striking girl, perhaps a few years younger than Mallory, with blue hair and a large Alice in Wonderland tattoo peeking out from under her three-quarter length sleeves. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help but overhear. Are you part of the Manor's murder mystery game?" she asked hesitantly.

Mallory and Danior both nodded. Nana and Eve were still engrossed in their gossiping.

Smiling, the young woman said, "My name's Geneviève. You run this place, right? It's beautiful."

"We do."

"I came with my cousin but I'm meeting my boyfriend here, only I don't see him." She hesitated.

"Well, he's not really my boyfriend, yet. We met online and this will be our first real date."

"Oh, what a coincidence." She shot Nana a dirty look, "And you chose to meet here during our first big murder mystery event."

"Yes. I guess that seems kind of weird, huh? We're both huge mystery fans. That's kind of what drew us together."

Nana smirked and disappeared with Eve. No doubt they were off to whisper some more about Mallory's date. Apparently, everyone was entitled to know about him but Mallory.

"What's your boyfriend's name, Geneviève?" Mallory asked, turning her attention back to their blue-haired guest. "Dan or I can look at the front desk and see if he's checked in yet."

Geneviève grinned. "That's okay, I'm sure he'll be along any moment. I guess, as the owners, you guys play these mystery games all the time?"

Danior, who'd been lingering beside Mallory, shook her head. "No, not at all. We do themed events for groups but this is our first time playing a murder mystery game—that's why we hired this outside company to run it. We're

amateurs compared to them, and now we get to experience it the way our guests do. If we like it, then we'll add it to our package. What about you, have you played something like this before?"

"Never," Geneviève said, "I'm looking forward to it though."

Mallory noticed a muddled flash through the girl's aura as she spoke. She was lying, either she had played before or she wasn't looking forward to it.

Geneviève glanced down at her pocket, which was now vibrating, and her spine straightened. "Anyway, it was nice meeting you, but I think this might be my new mystery man calling. Tootaloo."

Mallory watched her flit through the room only to disappear down the hall. There was something off about her. Oh, well. She was probably one of the actors. Mallory paused to examine the flatware, water cups, and napkin fans placed on the empty tables. Everything was polished to a high shine and precisely arranged.

Nothing more she could do here. Instead she searched the room to see if she could find her own mystery man. The front lounge room was full of people but there were only a handful of guys and none of them seemed to be on their own. Near the open pocket doors to the dining room, she could see a gentleman in glasses perusing the occult cabinet. He seemed fascinated by the wide array of paranormal antiques: Ouija boards, tarot cards, divining rods and ceramic palmistry hands. Was he her mystery date? He

was a little too mature looking for her taste. Not that looks were everything but attraction was important.

Mallory decided that it couldn't be him and wandered over to the large oil painting that hung on the wall above the fireplace. It showed three adults and seven children standing in front of a gypsy caravan—the same caravan that was now parked down by the beach. The determined face of her great-great-grandmother in the center of the portrait dominated the painting. The flesh tones of the oils were so realistic that Mallory could imagine the figures bursting free of the ornate wooden frame. A brass plate beneath the painting was etched with the words Horvath Family circa 1933.

Mallory moved closer to the fireplace where flames blazed in the hearth, all yellows and oranges. She glanced to her right at the guests milling at the bar beside her. Their attire ranged from tennis shoes and ripped denims to leather pumps and designer labels. A motley crew to be sure.

"Lovely, isn't it?" came a deep voice. Mallory spun to her left, nearly knocking the glass from the man's hand. Before her was the gentleman she'd been silently observing only moments ago—his smile fixed on his face as if chiseled. "The painting, I mean," he clarified. "The woman in the center looks, dare I say, like she's not someone to be crossed."

Mallory turned her gaze back to the painting. She studied the eyes—they were familiar—dark, fierce, as if searching the room even now. Mallory had never met her

great grandparents, let alone her great-great grandmother Nadya Franz, so she had no idea of her personality aside from what her mother had once told her, and yet she felt like she knew her.

“Yes,” Mallory said. “I guess. I think she had to be. Those weren’t easy times for my people.”

“Your people?”

“Roma.”

“Fair enough. I’m Harley Ace,” he said with a grin.

“Mallory Vianu. Nice to meet you.”

“Vianu, huh? So, you are one of the owners. I apologize if I offended you with my comment. Are these your ancestors, then? It says Horvath.”

“Yes, but no apology necessary. This is my great grandmother Simza’s family. Her parents were Beta and Hanzi Horvath and that was her beloved grandmother Nadya. Simza had all of these paintings done of her family to remember them. She died in childbirth, so we never met, but according to my grandfather Ion... they were a proud, strong family.”

“You said their life was hard. Were they caught up in the war?”

“Actually, their hardship started even earlier. Did you know the persecution of the Roma—Gypsies, as they were called back then—actually preceded the Nazi takeover. The police in Bavaria maintained a central database as early as 1899. My ancestors were pursued constantly, escaping a

workhouse in 1926 and sterilization in 1933, but eventually they were caught.”

“A terrible lot to have in life. No doubt I would have failed. What happened to them?”

Mallory frowned. “Rounded up in Bavaria and transported to the Dachau concentration camp. Only my great-grandmother Simza, who was thirteen at the time,” she pointed to the girl with the large blue eyes in the painting, “managed to escape.”

“How?”

“That’s a good question. I only know she was taken in by the Vianus and she married their son at eighteen.”

“Quite the story. Did I overhear you say that you were playing the murder mystery game with us this weekend?” Harley questioned.

Before Mallory could respond, a blonde woman with a bob approached. She toyed with the strand of pearls around her neck as she wrapped an arm through Harley’s and introduced herself as his wife, Lana.

Mallory reached out her hand and introduced herself.

“You heard correctly. We are all players here.” Mallory nodded.

“That hardly seems fair. We simply must join your team.”

“There are no teams,” Mallory laughed. “And don’t worry; we’re at no advantage. That’s why we hired an outside company. We just want to see the mystery game

from our guests' perspective to decide if it's going to become a regular event."

Harley nodded. "I'm teasing, anyway. I think that's a great idea." He turned to Danior who had arrived late to the conversation. Others were following her. "As I said, I'm Harley, this is my wife Lana... and the lovely dark-haired woman in glasses there is Michèle—or maybe it's Mitch. I've heard her called several names now, not all of which I'll repeat. Anyway, watch out for her, she was married to a detective for five years. She came with those French ladies raiding the snacks table, Denise and Gloria. We just met them, and the other lady is Michèle's sister, um..." Frowning, he pursed his lips together.

"Eve," Mallory said. "We know them very well. Eve lives here in Bohemian Lake and she and my Nana go way back."

Nonplussed, Harley snapped his fingers. "Right, Eve. She's the journalist—or is she the law expert? It seems everyone here is in on 'the know' but us."

"I highly doubt that," Michèle sniggered, as she and Eve came to stand in the circle. "Eve doesn't *know* much of anything anymore. She used to know how to get the bad guys off but it's been a while."

"Sweet mother-of-pearl. They weren't all bad guys. Some of them were just wrongly accused." Eve defended.

"Who said anything about your clients?" Michèle said in a quiet, mousy voice then laughed so hard she snorted.

“Oh, you are incorrigible, Mitch.” Eve shook her head. “You know that’s why we call her Mitch, right... rhymes with b—”

“Okay, that’s quite enough, you two,” Mallory cut in. Mallory had only met Michèle once before but she could already see these two were trouble together. Eve alone was a handful; add in someone with a similar genetic make-up and, well, there just wasn’t enough alcohol on hand.

Eve ignored Mallory with a wave of the hand, “Truth is, I work for the Trubble family now at Bohemian Private Eye Investigations & News, but I really just answer the phones and fact check.” She leaned forward and winked, “At least that’s what we like people to think.” Eve took a sip of her mimosa and smiled when she realized she still had the floor. “My second husband was a criminal lawyer. I used to work for him but he’s passed on to the great justice system in the sky.”

Lana shook her head. “Wow, I guess your background will really come in handy here.”

“Why?” Michèle straightened her glasses. “You thinkin’ about committin’ a crime?”

Lana took a step back. “Heavens, no, I just meant it would be beneficial while playing this game.”

Mallory couldn’t help but snicker, then she felt a poke in her side.

“Speaking of criminals, where’s the old bat?” Michèle asked.

“She disappeared when Joelle arrived—I think she’s up to something.” Eve barked.

“What else is new?” Mallory smiled and shrugged. “I wonder why Rebel isn’t here yet. I think Penny’s dropping her off on the way to the airport.”

“Oh, where’s she going?” Michèle asked.

“Somewhere warm. Cody’s been in the city all week for work, so she’s meeting him.” Mallory answered.

“She’s a brave soul to drive to the airport in this.” Michèle said.

“Actually, one of Cody’s colleagues, Detective Bones is driving her. He has something to do in the city too.” Eve said.

“Bones?” Michèle repeated, her sly half-grin growing wider. Thankfully a loud bell chimed and ruined whatever great punchline she had lined up.

One of the manor’s long-time employees, Emilion Grastari, threw out his arms and addressed the group in a thick Romanian accent. He was holding a string of balloons. “Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Manor, your home away from home for the next few days.” He wasn’t in his usual costume, an open-chested pirate-style shirt that showed off his chest. Today he was in the classic circus strong man’s costume which also happened to show off his muscled pecs. His bovver boots were scuffed and manly, and his hair was chic and grungy—most of it was pulled up into a man bun, leaving a few pieces that had escaped and now framed his handsome face. Unlike usual, he was sporting a

thick black moustache. "Step right up and make yourself comfortable. Not too comfortable, of course," he added with a creepy smile, as he motioned for everyone to enter the lounge area.

A heavy mist appeared at the other end of the room, and as it cleared, Mallory could just make out the form of a man and two women—a butler, a maid and a ringmaster.

"Come one. Come all. To the greatest dinner party of them all," the maid sang out.

Michèle hooted with laughter. A nudge from Eve's elbow caused her to double over slightly. Michèle gave Eve a dirty look before looking back at Mallory and Danior, and winking. Mallory couldn't help but compare them to evil twins.

The group of guests had now formed a semi-circle around the three, and clearing her throat, the woman in the maid's costume stepped forward to stand beside the ringmaster, who Mallory realized was Nana. "My name is Joelle Mackay, I am Madam Murter's trusted confidant and advisor," she said in a Quebecois accent. "As you know, Madam Murter, Lady of the Manor and Ringmaster of the Traveling Romani Carnival, has decided to close down the carnival for the weekend to throw a celebration in honor of the baby girl who was mysteriously left on her doorstep eighteen years ago today."

Mallory's jaw dropped. Nana wasn't kidding; they really had weaved some real-life facts into the game plot. She looked over at Danior to see how she was taking it, but

she seemed amused. Emilion had appeared at her side to hand her the bouquet of bright red balloons emblazoned with, "Happy Birthday!"

"Madam Murter has invited you, her treasured carnival employees and guests, to wine and dine with her tonight at 6pm. There will be food, drinks and live music. You will be expected to dress in your best carnival attire."

"And just what is our best carnival attire?" Michèle said loudly.

"We have delivered basic wardrobe pieces to your rooms that you may use for the duration of your stay."

"Costumes?" Michèle complained.

Joelle looked at her with disdain. "Naturally, we expect that all of you will enjoy participating in this sort of thing. Madam Murter has many activities prepared tonight for everyone's entertainment, and since she does so enjoy the occult, we shall communicate with the other side. One of your fellow acts, Ms. Claire Voyant will hold a séance to communicate with the dearly departed tonight after dinner."

Harley raised his hand. "When do we find out our act?"

Lise Trix, the manor's administrative assistant and guest services agent, dressed in red pants, suspenders, and a white hat, stepped forward, carrying a basket. "Inside this basket is an envelope for each of you, containing a nametag which you are to pin to your outfit, as well as a complete biography of your character. The instructions are simple. You have the afternoon to read and memorize your biographies. You may only tell the others the basic information about

your character: name, occupation, family ties, things like that. And you must stay in character when you are around others. You'll have a list of secrets to share. Oh, and one lucky person will have a list of victims that they must get alone and knock off without any other player suspecting. If you are that person, you are to keep that to yourself, or the game will be over before it begins. There will be a monetary prize at the end for the best sleuth, and for the murderer, if he or she lasts to the end without being caught."

Lise set down the basket and gestured to it. "Your identities await you. All meals are served in the dining room. The game formally begins at dinner so please get ready. You will find that your outfits have all been delivered to your rooms. The manor also has a costume room available that you can rent from if you like."

"This is so exciting," Danior whispered, as the envelopes were passed out to everyone in the room.

"There is one more important rule that must be followed. If and when you are murdered during the game. Please refrain from being seen. It does detract from the game's ambiance when the murder victims continue to interact. There are four of us designated as keepers of the dead, and we will see that you are sufficiently tended to so there is no need to worry about food or entertainment." Joelle looked inside the nearly empty basket and picked up the last three remaining envelopes. Calling each name with a moment's pause between. "Rebel Rouse, Elizabeth Bowler and Geneviève Edmondson."

“We’re still waiting on two of those people,” Lise said. “But Geneviève Edmondson checked in already. She should be here.”

“Very good, has anyone seen Geneviève?” Joelle shouted.

“How could anyone miss her?” Eve mumbled in Mallory’s ear.

“Pardonne-moi?” Joelle asked.

Danior and Mallory glanced about the room looking for their new friend with the bright blue hair, but no one responded.

Mallory peered down at the invitation she held in her hands. French Medium. Well, that wasn’t too much of a stretch. She leaned over and peeked at Danior’s. German Songstress.

She looked up just as Gloria passed her invitation to Denise and crossed her arms over her chest. “Dress attire: A fedora, a trench coat and a press pass? Oh, God, we’re writers?” She huffed. “They never get anything right!”

“Look again, we’re journalists, dear.” Denise clarified.

“Even worse. There has to be some mistake. How am I not the witty detective?”

Eve opened her envelope and pulled out the invitation. A broad smile crossed her face as she read. “Oh, I like mine.”

“Good, then you’re willing to trade.” Gloria reached for the envelope in Eve’s hand.

Eve quickly moved away from her friend. "You wouldn't like this, either, trust me."

"Attention mystery guests!" the man in the butler's costume called out. "My name is Bronson but I'll be playing the role of Remy Martin this weekend. If you haven't formally checked in as of yet, please see Lise at the front desk, and we will hand out keys and provide a tour. For the rest of you, please get changed and meet back in the foyer for drinks and appetizers at 4pm."

Danior puffed out her chest. "I am the guest of honor, Lovey Singer, and yet I still must sing for my supper." Reaching for Mallory's invitation, she asked. "What are you here to do?"

Mallory moved her invitation away from Danior's fingers. "Apparently, I'm able to summon the dead." She looked over at the girl next to her, who was standing on her tiptoes, looking lost.

"Hi, I'm Mallory."

"Hmm?" she asked distractedly. "Oh, forgive me," she said, stretching out a hand. "I'm Vee."

"Where are you from?"

"Oh!" Vee reached into the envelope and brought out her invitation. "I'm not sure." She carefully read her invitation before answering. "I'm British. Miss Lil Scammer. That doesn't sound good." Biting her lip, she read a bit more. "Madam Murter's gal Friday, publicist and executor of the will."

"Sounds like fun to me," Eve said.

“Yeah, if you like pantsuits and tea.”

“Tea, heavens no.” Eve said, and stuck out her tongue.
“Eww.”

Mallory laid her hand on Danior’s forearm. “I’m going to go talk to Lise about our blue-haired friend’s disappearing act. We can’t have a guest wandering off without knowing the rules.”

“Maybe she found her online date and they’re getting to know each other, if you know what I mean.” Eve said playfully and elbowed Danior. “Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.”

Danior laughed. “True, and don’t forget if it’s part of the show, Lise isn’t gonna admit to anything. She signed a form with Joelle’s company, remember, so that would be cheating.”

“You really think Geneviève’s little disappearing act during orientation was part of the show? I mean, we haven’t even really started yet.”

“What are you all gabbing about?” Denise asked looking back and forth.

Mallory quickly described meeting Geneviève.

“Well, if her cousin isn’t here and her boyfriend didn’t show then wouldn’t it stand to reason that she left to go and look for them?”

Mallory’s eyebrows drew together. She glanced over her shoulder and then back to Eve. “I guess, but she made a point of saying that they’d never met. They chatted online, and he invited her to come here, so how would she know where to look? Also, there were no other leftover envelopes

for a man so, technically, if he's part of the game then he should be here."

"Hmm, so you think someone tricked her into coming here? Maybe we should check her room," Gloria suggested. "To see if her bags are gone. You know, to hunt for clues?"

"That's a good idea," Eve agreed.

"Wait a minute, you said she knew who you were," Denise commented.

"Yes," Mallory replied.

"Oh, you sweet gullible thing, that's definitely a set up, then. How would she have known who you were?"

Mallory laughed. "Touché. I've been played."

"How obvious," Eve commented. "What do you want to bet this mystery revolves around finding the missing new girl?"

"Who are you playing, Denise?" Mallory asked.

"Gloria and I are journalists and we've come to write a feature on the famed Carnival owner. Isn't that a hoot? Wendy Litesdimm and Deedee Hachett."

Gloria reached for Eve's card. "And who are you?"

Eve snatched her hand away. "Ah-ah-ah. Hands off, hatchet job. I'm not telling."

Spotting Lana and Harley standing behind the newel post at the far end of the foyer with their backs toward the others, Mallory started in their direction. As she approached, she noticed Lana pressing her fingers against her temple. "Well, where, then?" she whispered harshly.

“How am—” Catching Mallory standing nearby, Harley turned. “Ah, Mallory,” he said, “Ready to play?”

Mallory smiled. “Are you lost? You sounded flustered —”

“Flustered?” Lana asked with a slight frown. She glanced back at Harley who simply shrugged. Lana shook her head impatiently. “We were just trying out our characters.”

Three

Detective Kaden Bones opened the giant double doors to the Manor and held them open for Penny Trubble and Rebel Rouse to walk through. It was only 3 p.m. but the snowstorm had darkened the sky.

Inside, the entryway glowed from Victorian lamps reflecting off the dark wood of the front desk, close to but not quite tucked beneath a large wooden staircase.

“Did it say when they might reschedule?” Rebel asked as they shook the snow from their coats and stamped their feet.

Penny shook her head, taking in the enormous fireplace in the lounge area off to the side.

At the front desk, the guest services girl, a twenty-something year old named Lise Trix was whispering excitedly into her smart phone. She had hair the color of cotton candy and a reputation for being less than sweet unless of course you were Danior’s boyfriend, Emilion, a little known fact that drove Danior up the wall.

“Hello, welcome to Caravan Manor. You must be the final arrivals.” she said while unwrapping one of the lollipops set aside for the guests.

Rebel frowned and gestured to the phone wedged between her shoulder and ear. "Well, I am. Penny was supposed to be on her way to the airport. Are you busy? We can wait."

"Nope, it's just my friend." She set the phone on the desk and shoved the candy inside her right cheek. "I'll call her back," she said, her words a wet garble. Lise tinkered at the keyboard. "Oh, yes. I only have one room booked here for you, Rebel," she said.

Just as Penny stepped forward to explain she wasn't staying, she heard, "Well, looky here!"

Everyone turned in the direction of the voice and, as Penny had already surmised, there stood her pain-in-the-butt sidekick.

Eve rushed down the corridor but stopped when she saw Penny's face. "Why so sad?"

Rebel stepped forward and hugged Eve. "Pen's flight has just been cancelled. I think she's in mourning."

"Hot dog!" Eve exclaimed.

The dark and sultry Mallory Vianu appeared behind her. "Rebel! Penny! So glad you could make it. Take off your coats and grab a drink and a snack.

Penny glanced over to the lounge area where bone white china plates were stacked in neat columns on the end of the buffet table. Hundreds of diminutive sandwiches had been artfully arranged on silver platters, and Penny felt her mouth water.

“Everyone’s just gone off to change into their costumes but they should be down soon. Emilion will take your bags up to your room for you when he returns.”

Penny smiled at Mallory and planted a kiss on Eve’s cheek while Kaden and Rebel headed straight to the welcome bar that Mallory had pointed out.

Mallory brushed a cascade of fine black hair behind her ear and pulled Penny in for a hug, “Nana told me her tarot cards indicated that something would happen to ruin your trip. I’m sorry. I’d hoped she was wrong.”

“Nonsense. This is great news.” Eve said to Penny and smiled a little too brightly. “You and Cody can take another trip. It’s better to be safe.”

Penny scowled.

“At least now you can join us in Danior’s birthday party fun,” Mallory said.

Eve waved her arms to encompass the entire manor. “Solving this mystery with you guys will be a hoot! It’ll be just like Christmas at Slayed on the Slopes Resort but with less of that jerk face ex of yours.”

Rebel caught Penny’s eye from across the room and held up a whisky tumbler. Penny nodded gratefully, and Rebel turned back to fix her drink.

“I think you mean Sleights & Slopes.” She lowered her voice, “and please don’t bring up Lucas in front of everyone—it’s tacky. Also, let’s hope it’s not similar, considering two people were murdered and another person was injured.”

“Blah, blah, blah. We caught the bad guy.” Eve said.

Rebel struggled not to smile.

"Anyway, back to the point. So, you knew our flight was going to be cancelled?" Penny asked. "Is that why you asked me to stop by?"

Eve nodded and grinned. "Busted. I didn't know if you would. You don't always listen to me, but otherwise Nana said you would have been stuck on the side of the highway. You're welcome! Consider me your guardian angel."

Penny rolled her eyes. "Meddling employee would be more accurate."

"I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that."

"What else is new?"

"You're gonna have a great time and, of course," Eve turned to Kaden who was now coming back from the bar with Rebel, "Detective Bones here will need to stay too."

Mallory cleared her throat and held out her hand to Kaden. When she pulled her hand away and straightened her shoulders, her leather jacket parted, revealing sleek curves beneath her thin, cropped sweater. With her cascading, shiny dark hair; sculpted cheekbones; and olive skin, she looked like a Spanish movie star. But Mallory's eyes, much like the rest of her family's, were a startling cross between blue and green.

Kaden gaped at her, beer dribbling down his chin.

"Of course. Detective Bones, you're Jack Young's cousin, right?"

The detective nodded.

“Nice to finally meet you. How long have you been in town?” Mallory asked.

“I transferred over from the city just before Christmas. My mother still lives there.”

“What do you think of our little Bohemian Lake, so far?”

“I like it. I visited here, well not here, but my aunt and uncle’s vineyard quite a bit when I was a kid, and so it is like a second home, or rather a third home—my parents are divorced.” Kaden laughed at himself.

“I get it. I bounced around quite a bit as well. Where does your father live?”

“In Europe. He’s a musician, so he travels, but we lived mostly in Germany when I was younger.”

Mallory’s eyebrows shot up. “What a small world. We’ll have to chat later; it seems we have much in common, Mr. Bones.”

“Thank you, Miss Vianu. That sounds like an offer I’d love to take you up on, but I have plans tonight so if I could get a raincheck?” Kaden said.

Mallory blushed and nodded. If Penny didn’t know better, she’d say these two had chemistry. Eve gave Penny a sneaky side glance. It seemed she’d noticed too.

“I don’t think it’s a very good idea that you leave,” Eve chirped, “Not according to Nana’s cards, but you do what you gottta do.”

The detective frowned and walked to the window where the snow was now at near white out levels. “I think I’ll

take my chances. I'll just wait for you in the car, Pen. Text me in the next five minutes if you decide to stay."

"Well, I'm definitely staying and I haven't been here since I was a kid," Rebel said, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

"Really?" Eve exclaimed. "Well then, Ms. Always on YouTube here will just have to give you a tour." Eve nodded toward the desk.

Eve reached forward and tapped on the lollipop stick. "This interferes with your pronunciation, Trixie dear, so maybe you should lay off while you're manning the front desk."

Glowering, Lise removed the lollipop. "The name is Lise Trix," she said to Eve as she pointed to her name tag. Then she turned to Mallory. "I'm sorry, Ms. Vianu, but all of our rooms are booked up. I'm not sure where to put Ms. Trubble."

Eve looked her up and down and then turned to Mallory. "Oh, pish posh," she said. "Surely she can squish in somewhere. Most of the rooms have double beds. She can stay in mine and Michèle's room. It'll be great!"

Rebel and Penny exchanged a terrified glance. Eve was unstoppable when she got an idea in her head. Penny almost said she'd rather slide into the lake.

Rebel coughed. "That's silly. I'm her best friend and I'm here alone; it's obvious she'll bunk with me."

"Thanks for fighting over me, ladies," Penny began. "but I was just checking some other flights. I'm sure Kaden can see me safely to the airport."

Eve shook her head and crossed her arms.
“Nonsense.”

“Have you looked out there?” Rebel gestured to the window.

“Nana says all flights will be grounded within an hour. Besides, you’ll never get anywhere and then you’ll be stuck in the woods in a blizzard.” Eve pointed a knobby finger at Penny, “Don’t test Nana. You know she’s always right. You and that stubborn-ass detective can both stay here, at least until the weather clears. Besides, the game sounds really fun. It’s a Carnival theme.” She put her hand on Penny’s arm.

Penny watched through the window as Detective Bones walked around the car once again. He paused to bend down for the fourth time and then returned. When he opened the front doors, a gust of wind blew in and Penny could see that the heavy flakes were swirling faster now. She also thought she saw someone all bundled up slinking around the side of the house.

“Mal, where’s Nana?”

“Oh, she’s upstairs with the event planner.”

Penny nodded but said nothing.

Kaden stomped his feet on the mat as he came back inside. “Looks like your friends are right. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I must have driven over something on the way in. My tire’s flat.”

Penny bit her lip. Bested by the old ladies again. Mallory, who Penny was sure was oblivious to Nana and Eve's devices, grinned. She might not have been part of the plot, but she was clearly happy with the result.

"That's probably for the best, this road does become impassable in a bad storm. We've had some cancellations due to the weather so we can give you your own room. No charge. Let me just talk to Lise. We've blocked off certain areas because of the game but I have an idea," Mallory said and walked a few steps to the desk.

Eve clasped her hands behind her back and hummed along to the radio.

Penny tapped Kaden's shoulder and turned away from their audience. "Don't you have a spare? You can change it and we can make it back to town, at least."

Kaden pressed his lips together and then let out a breath of air. "Well, I could try but it's coming down pretty fast out there and my spare isn't going to have the best traction. I'd hate to get stranded on the road somewhere or wind up sliding into the lake. I've heard from Jack that Nana's predictions are usually correct and if she wanted us here, then it must be better than the alternative."

Rebel leaned in and smiled, "I'd also like to point out that it would be rude for you to leave Danior's birthday party now since you're not going away."

Penny gave Rebel cut-eye. Then she snuck a look at Eve over Kaden's shoulder and imagined a cozy evening with friends by the fire. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. "Fine. I

can stand it for one night and we'll either head back to town or catch a flight tomorrow. How long can a snowstorm last, right?"

They walked back to the desk, and Penny nodded to Eve and Mallory.

"You make a good case for safety," Penny said. "We'll stay for tonight and re-evaluate tomorrow."

Eve clapped her hands.

"Fabulous," Mallory said and grinned. "Lise is working on the room situation. I'll meet you all back in the parlor. I just need to let the chef know to set two more places and we'll uncork another couple bottles of wine for dinner."

The Caravan's employee Emilion Grastari appeared to collect the luggage. In true Caravan Manor spirit, he wore a costume. Penny had met him only once before but he seemed a good sport about playing whatever part he was given; today he donned a black low-cut leotard, and a painted-on moustache. Nana said it was part of the Caravan experience. Penny had to agree that their characters lent a certain ambiance to the place.

"How about that tour, Lise?" Eve asked after Mallory had disappeared. "I'll come along. I have a few questions. Plus, I want to hear about the ghost again."

"Ghost?" Kaden repeated.

Eve nodded. "It's a great story. I heard we're going to be doing a séance tonight. Maybe the ghost will communicate. Come on, let's get to it!"

About the Author

Rachael Stapleton lives in a Second-Empire Victorian home with her husband and two children in Canada where she dashes about aged wood, arched dormers and snowy hills, making up holiday themed whodunit stories.

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Authors Note:

Thank you for reading the second book in my Haunted House Flipper series! I love writing about Jack and Juniper's spooky old Victorian. Next up we're going to meet another one of the mansion's ghosts and he's not exactly friendly. We're also going to delve deeper into Victoria's haunted past to find out exactly what drove the Doctor to kill his blushing bride. As per usual, bug hugs to my family, friends, reviewers and fans for their generosity and encouragement. Thanks to my awesome editor, Susan Croft who never lets me down; my cover designer, Mariah Sinclair for her flawless designs and fabulous prices. And a big shout-out to Denise Howeth for the quick turnaround on the beta read. And, thank you for reading my books. If you want more, please be sure to review them on Amazon so I can afford to continue. Oh, and come and say hello on my Facebook page, Twitter or my website.

With much love,
Rachael

Gingerbread Cupcakes with Cinnamon Frosting

INGREDIENTS:

½ c. unsalted butter, room temperature
½ c. brown sugar
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 egg
1¼ c. all-purpose flour
½ tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. baking soda
¼ tsp. salt
1 tsp. cinnamon
½ tsp. ginger
½ tsp. nutmeg
¼ tsp. allspice
½ c. buttermilk, room temperature
½ c. molasses

Cream cheese frosting:

½ c. (1 stick) butter, room temperature
¼ tsp. salt
½ tsp. cinnamon
1½ tsp. vanilla extract
3 c. powdered sugar

8 oz. (1 block) original cream cheese, room temperature for 30 minutes

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a muffin pan with liners, set aside.

In the bowl of a stand mixer, beat the butter, brown sugar and vanilla until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. With mixing speed on low, add the egg, mix just until combined.

In a medium size mixing bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, and allspice. With mixing speed on low, alternate adding the dry ingredients along with the buttermilk and molasses. Mix just until combined.

Fill liners $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way full. Place in the oven and bake for 18-20 minutes. Remove and allow to cool in the pans for 5 minutes before transferring to a wire rack to cool completely.

Meanwhile to prepare the cream cheese frosting, using the paddle attachment cream the butter, salt, cinnamon and vanilla extract for 2 minutes or until light and fluffy. With mixing speed on low gradually add the powdered sugar, beat until it forms a fondant-looking ball. Add cream cheese and mix on the lowest speed possible for $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes, then place in refrigerator to chill for at least 15 minutes or until cupcakes have completely cooled. Allow to stand at room

temperature for 5 minutes before placing in a bag to pipe onto cooled cupcakes. Top cupcakes with desired sprinkles.